ARGOSY

ALL-STORY WEEKLY

APRIL 28

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ARGOSY
ALL-STORY WEEKLY

VOLUME 194 SATURDAY, APRIL 28, 1928 NUMBER 4

Thieves' Market

By JUDSON PHILIPS and BOYDEN SPARKES

"You fix the man right, and I'll take care of the girl"— thus the fate of the two spies was pronounced

CHAPTER I.

THE BIG CHANCE.

BARRY RAND shifted uneasily on the hard wooden chair in old man Hamilton's outer office. He smiled, a trifle grimly, as he recognized that hollow sensation in the pit of his stomach and felt the clamminess of his tightly clasped hands. It was a reminiscent feeling. He had known it scores of times when, as a pilot in the R. A. F., he had waited for the hour to take off from his drome.

During that period of waiting his imagination had always run rampant through the range of possibilities. It was then that he made a hectic examination of his machine, though he knew that a dozen competent mechanics had already passed it. Then he remembered what had happened to others.

It was nothing more nor less than a cold, nauseating fear which clung to him after he had climbed into his seat, after the plane had started its bumping course across the field, but which left him the moment that bumping ceased and he realized that he was off. Then he became cool, poised, and unafraid.

He wondered now if he would have a similar reaction when the door to Hamilton's private office opened and he received his summons.

Barry Rand had sought this interview with the president of the Atlas Casualty Insurance Company himself, and sought it in a daring fashion. For a year he had been a minor employee of the firm, a filing clerk. For a year he had taken orders and run errands for the oily little individual in a pinch back suit who was his immediate chief. A man who might have been his orderly some years back. A man who took an unholy delight in asserting his authority over Rand.

Rand was not popular in the office. In the first place, he dressed entirely too well for a filing clerk, and, to add insult to injury, he carried a stick. Pure swank this was, in the eyes of the other clerks.

The possibility that he might not have the price of a satisfactory dinner in the pockets of those well cut trousers never occurred to them.

Rand had taken his job at the Atlas out of sheer necessity. Like so many other men who came back from the late lamented, he had no position to return to. Moreover, he had not served in our armies.

Being several years on the adolescent side of the age limit, he had gone up to Canada, where at that time boys who had scarcely turned twenty, boys with deep lines in their faces and perhaps a touch of gray already appearing about the temples, found themselves holding positions of high rank and grave responsibility.

Rand had won his wings and his commission, had done his fighting, and had come back with the idea of looking in a leisurely fashion for just that special niche into which he was particularly made to fit.

But the niche was not so easily found. When his somewhat meager finances had been drained to the bottom, he took a job at what our business executives are pleased to call a "living wage"—a job which would "tide him over" until he found the right thing.

Quickly dissatisfied, he jumped to something else. Thus there followed a succession of unimportant jobs, with the right thing never appearing.

Finally he reached the Atlas Casualty Insurance Company. Then he tried to face facts. Perhaps there was no right place for him. Perhaps his only chance was to go into a big concern of this sort and work up. At any rate, he would give it a whirl.

And now he was sick of the whole thing. He was sick of being ordered about by that overfed swine downstairs. He was sick of listening to the hope held out to him by his friends. If he did his work exceptionally well, some executive would pick him out for a better position.

Just how one could do anything exceptional about filing insurance policies and letters, he had not been able to discover. He was sick of being hungry. He was sick of the dingy hall bedroom in which he was forced to live.

In desperation he had written a letter to old man Hamilton. He had told his position and what he thought his capabilities were. He added that he felt there must be a real job for a man of his sort.

If there were dangerous jobs, jobs that required real courage and incurred real risk, he was willing to take them. He would rather be dead than stay in this rut. If there was nothing for him, he wanted to quit.

It was without doubt an impertinent letter for a twenty-five-dollar-a-week

clerk to write to the president of Atlas, and Barry Rand was confident that he would find a pink dismissal slip in his pay envelope on Saturday night. But there was none, and on Monday morning he found a memo asking him to appear at Hamilton's office as soon as he arrived.

Now he waited anxiously, for there could be only two reasons for the interview having been granted: either Hamilton had sent for him merely to put into words his opinion of an impudent young puppy, or else—something worth while to do.

Presently the buzzer on the secretary's desk rang. She looked up at Rand and smiled.

"Mr. Hamilton will see you now," she told him.

Rand got up from his chair, and, with a nervous jerk at his tie, entered the private sanctum of the head of the firm. Hamilton sat at a great flat-topped desk looking through some papers. He scarcely glanced at Rand as he came in, but indicated a chair beside his desk. Rand sat down and waited.

From the pile of papers in front of him Hamilton finally drew Rand's letter. He leaned back and reread it.

Then he peered at Rand from beneath his shaggy eyebrows.

"You wrote this?" he asked sharply.

Rand nodded.

"You say here that you have courage," said Hamilton, a faint smile hovering on his lips. "I don't know about courage, but you certainly have plenty of nerve."

"It was not meant as an impertinence, sir."

"Ummm." Hamilton glanced at the letter again. "You say you are fitted for a better position than the one you now hold. Have you had any special sort of education? Technical?"

"No, sir, but—"

"Been to a business school?"

"No."

"Then, what are your special qualifications?"

Rand leaned eagerly forward in his chair.

"Look here, sir. I haven't had any special sort of training, that's true; but I have got energy and determination and courage. I'm not boasting, Mr. Hamilton. I've had the opportunity to prove that to myself time and time again.

"I was an officer in the flying corps during the war. I saw two years of active service and I've been in a dozen tight places. I want to capitalize those attributes."

Hamilton looked at the younger man shrewdly.

"Why not put some of this energy into your present position. We all had to start at the bottom."

Rand laughed.

"That's what all men in your place say. But when you started in the insurance business it was a virgin field. What chance has a young man to-day? All the big opportunities have been taken.

"What I want is to get something to do in your firm that will give me a chance to show that I can be worth something to you.

"Why, Mr. Hamilton, the second week I was here I knew all there was to know about the routine of being a filing clerk. It doesn't require a great deal of intelligence."

"I notice you didn't say anything about intelligence in your letter," remarked Hamilton dryly.

Rand blushed.

"I had thought," he said, "that I might be able to do something in your investigation department."

"That requires training."

"I'm willing to learn, sir."

"My dear boy," said Hamilton, "we haven't time to train our investigators. They come to us already equipped. Quite frankly, I don't see that there is any place for you in Atlas."

"You mean that I'm fired?"

Hamilton leaned back, the tips of his fingers together.

"Just that."

Rand got up stiffly.

"Thank you."

"Sit down," said Hamilton, an amused twinkle in his eyes.

"I appreciate any willingness on your part to give me advice," said Rand bitterly, "but I've had enough advice in the last year or so to last me a lifetime."

Old man Hamilton laughed.

"Don't be an idiot. I'm going to make you a proposition. Here—I recommend these cigars."

Rand sat down, a trifle bewildered, but with a confident smile that had been lacking up to this point. The bumping had stopped. He had taken off.

Hamilton smoked in silence for a moment.

"Your letter reached me at an opportune moment for you, Rand," he said finally. "It came at the same time as an appeal from the furriers guild, asking me to recommend some man who could put a stop to the constant inroads being made into their stocks by thieves."

"But that is a job for the police, Mr. Hamilton."

"Wrong," said Hamilton good-naturedly. "The police are helpless to do anything about it. Let me ask you a question, Rand. If you wanted to hide a leaf, let us say, where would you hide it?"

Rand thought for a moment. "In a forest."

Hamilton's eyes gleamed. "Right. Now, by the same sort of logic, if you were a jewel thief, what would be the most effective way of cloaking your activities?"

"Setting up as a jeweler, I suppose."

"Let us say no more about intelligence," smiled Hamilton. "You pass the test one hundred per cent. Look here, Rand, in the last year there has been such a terrific loss among the furriers, silk merchants, and others who handle raw materials, that the first thing you know we're going to have to give up insuring them."

"You could raise the rates," suggested Rand.

"But to such a point that they would become prohibitive. The merchants would better take the chance on theft. You spoke about the police, and I told you they were helpless.

"Of course, they may nab the actual robber, who throws an ash can through the window and loots the stock, but they can't touch the man higher up who really operates the machine. That's the man the merchants want to get."

"But isn't he a receiver of stolen goods?" asked Rand.

"Yes, but try and prove it. That's what I want you to do. You see, the thieves take their loot to a warehouse, for example. Then the big man buys from a dummy second party who is impossible to locate.

"He has a perfectly valid bill of sale, however, and I defy you to find a jury of twelve men who would convict a man of criminally receiving stolen goods when he has an honest-to-God bill of sale. If you could find enough juries like that the whole structure of business would collapse."

Rand nodded.

"The real criminal is a business man," Hamilton explained. "A business man who is constantly skating on thin ice. Occasionally one foot may get in the water. Your job is to catch him at that moment and pull him all the way in."

"But won't that require an elaborate espionage system to locate the crooked men in the business—to separate the sheep from the goats?"

"No," said Hamilton, "for right now I can give you the name of the man who has been at the back of these fur robberies. Can show you his name and business address in the phone book.

"The honest furriers know who he is, but they can't prove his guilt. They want a man who has the courage and intelligence to dig below the surface

and find a flaw in the operations of this crook.

"If they can get him, they can get any others. I'm going to recommend you as the man to do it."

Rand's lips tightened.

"Who is the crook?" he asked.

"His name," said Hamilton, "is Korbeck. Morris Korbeck. He has been in various businesses. He is running a giant warehouse at present which I suspect would put the cave of Ali Baba and his forty thieves to shame. He is a shrewd business man who knows the law inside and out.

"In dealing with him, Rand, you haven't got a stage villain in an opera cloak and a silk hat. He's a suave scoundrel who knows all the tricks in the game a hundred times better than you do. The odds are all on his side."

"Always play the long shots myself," said Rand.

"Good," smiled Hamilton. "You will have to carry the fight to him, though. He isn't looking for trouble, and he's in a well-nigh impregnable position. He's the dealer, and he always deals himself the best hand. Your job is to make the losing cards win."

"It can be done. I'll do it."

The lines about Hamilton's eyes softened into an almost affectionate twinkle.

"A little while ago you were talking about a 'living wage,'" he said. "Aren't you interested in the business end of this proposition?"

"What I want most, Mr. Hamilton, is a chance. You're giving it to me."

"Well, in any case, this is the proposition. You draw on me for any money you may need. I'm making an investment in you. You can pay me back at a regular banking interest when the time comes.

"If you can get Korbeck, you can write your own ticket with the furriers. If you fail, then I lose my investment and you lose your big chance."

"When do I begin?"

Hamilton smiled.

"I told you you were fired. You're a free lance. You begin now." He pushed back his chair and stood up. "You have nerve and courage and intelligence, Rand. You're up against the most unscrupulous and the shrewdest crook in the business. You are going to need everything you've got. Good luck!"

He held out his hand, and Rand gripped it tightly.

"I won't try to say thank you, Mr. Hamilton."

"Don't. Results will be a sufficient expression of thanks."

A few minutes later Rand was walking through the downstairs office, his stick under his arm, his hat brim pulled down at a rakish angle.

"Say, where do you think you are going at this time of day?" demanded the individual in the pinch back suit who had been his chief.

"That," explained Rand, "is none of your damned business!"

CHAPTER II.

PARTNERS.

IT had been at Roger Ballantyne's birthday celebration a year before that Barry Rand met Jane Campbell. Ballantyne had been a pilot in Rand's division during the war, and their friendship had carried on afterward.

Ballantyne had had one theory of existence during the days of active service which had lasted. It was his belief that each time you went up in a machine your chances of returning were very slight, therefore while you were on the ground it behooved you to get all the enjoyment out of life that you possibly could. His enjoyment consisted in tilting the right elbow in an imitation of perpetual motion until the said right elbow became paralyzed.

Now that the war was done and he was always on the ground, he did nothing but enjoy himself.

Rand had arrived at that party quite late, so late in fact that he had found that every one else had a hopeless head start.

There was Ballantyne in an almost comatose state mechanically mixing cocktails; there was a girl doing the Charleston to the lugubrious melody of Siegfried's Funeral March played by a young man who was so moved by his own music that the tears streamed down his flushed cheeks; there was another man, who collared him and insisted on telling stories about traveling salesmen that Rand had heard in his grammar-school days.

In one corner, however, sat a girl who was being left severely alone. This, Rand discerned, was not because she was unattractive, but because, like himself, she had not become imbued with the party spirit.

He made his way across the room to her side.

"This is ghastly," he said.

She looked up at him sharply and saw that he was in her boat, as it were.

"I'm Roger's cousin," she explained. "Somehow I hadn't connected this sort of thing with a birthday party."

Rand grinned.

"Roger is still fighting the battle of Paris," he said. "Personally I have developed a great longing for scrambled eggs, and I know just the place, a few blocks from here, to get them. Will you take a chance on me and go?"

"You," the girl told him as she went for her wrap, "have the makings of a great philanthropist."

And so began a friendship which presently blossomed into romance. Jane Campbell was the daughter of a Middle Western college professor, long on background but short on finances.

After completing her education Jane had come to New York for a job, and had found one with Fotheringham, the publisher. After a year she had become old A. J. Fotheringham's private secretary at the munificent salary of thirty-five dollars a week.

On that first night she had exchanged confidences with Rand as people who have just met will sometimes do. He had begun his work at the Atlas Casualty Insurance Company. To him the job was just another of a string of ineffectual positions that he had held since the war.

They found that they had many tastes in common. They were both a trifle discouraged, and this, too, was a bond.

The next night Rand went to her little apartment. He smoked his pipe, and she read him bits from a book she had liked. Later they talked of this and that, and finally Jane made coffee and a few sandwiches, refusing to allow Rand the extravagance of another scrambled-egg orgy.

Six months later he told her something of what was in his heart. Yet it was a hopeless situation. Their combined salaries were scarcely enough to live on, as people of their sort would want to live.

It was not as if either of them were in positions of promise. Rand could see no future for himself. Jane had already reached the top of the ladder, for a woman, at Fotheringham's.

"And the devil of it is, Jane, I love you so much," he had said. "It isn't fair to ask you to wait, and yet I simply can't lose you."

She had knelt in front of him and looked up into his tired gray eyes.

"Don't be silly, old boy. You are not going to lose me. We've got to wait, though, Barry. We've got to keep searching for the chance that will start you off.

"When we find it we will give up everything else and play the game through together. Together we can't lose, Barry. But we must be patient."

Six months more had passed without a gleam. Then in desperation the

letter to old man Hamilton had been written.

Now he stood on the sidewalk in front of the great Atlas Building, his opportunity ahead of him.

Though it was an extravagance he could ill afford, he hailed a taxi.

"To Fotheringham's," he told the driver. "And I'm in a hell of a hurry."

A few moments later he burst into Mr. Fotheringham's outer office, kissed Jane, much to the amusement of the office boy, and sat on the edge of her desk, scattering Mr. Fotheringham's private correspondence to the four winds.

"Hamilton saw me," he said. "He has given me a chance. Oh, Jane!" And he gripped both her hands tightly in his. "Look here, let's get out of this. Come to lunch."

"But, my dear boy, I can't go to lunch for an hour yet. Office rules."

"To the devil with office rules. I've got to talk to you. Tell 'em your grandmother died."

"But, Barry—"

"Jane, it's a really big chance. I've got to talk to you about it."

She got up from her chair with a smile.

"I'll probably lose my job."

"What of it? Jane, in a few weeks we'll be rolling in wealth."

Out on the street he hailed another cab, despite Jane's protests. He gave the address of a restaurant some distance away.

"But why should we go there, Barry?" she asked.

Her hand was clasped tightly in his as they settled back in the seat.

"About a year ago," he explained, "I met you and we went to this place for scrambled eggs. Remember? That was an epoch.

"To-day marks another epoch, and we're going to have scrambled eggs at that same table if I have to bust some one on the nose!"

Fortunately the table was vacant. After he had ordered, Rand lit a cigarette and leaned eagerly forward to tell his story.

He told her about his talk with Hamilton, about the fur robberies, about Morris Korbeck, the man who was too clever for the police force.

"It was the greatest opportunity that could have come my way," he said enthusiastically. "I'm not fitted for any business, Jane. I haven't had the necessary training, and I haven't any aptitude for it. I loathe it.

"But I have a normal amount of intelligence, and I have plenty of nerve. I'm going to beat this bird Korbeck if it takes a leg. And then—"

"But, Barry dear—" There were little lines of worry about Jane Campbell's eyes. "There's danger. It's not going to do us any good if you get yourself killed."

Rand thought it unnecessary to emphasize the danger element.

"Nonsense," he said. "I've stood up against a battery of anti-aircraft guns, and I've had a run-in with a machine-gun nest. You don't think a bunch of East Side housebreakers with pea shooters and lead pipes are going to worry us, do you?"

Jane was silent for a moment, thinking.

"Barry, how are you going to get this man Korbeck?"

"I haven't made any plans yet. I came straight to you. Of course I'll have to go down and get the lay of the land."

"But see here," Jane objected, "just watching him won't do you any good. From what you've told me, both the police and the honest furriers know he's the cause of their trouble, but they can't get anything on him. Isn't that true?"

Rand nodded.

"You'll have to worm into his organization somehow and find out what the flaw is in his operations."

"Good idea," agreed Rand.

"But it would be difficult for an in-

telligent looking young man like yourself to get into the organization. You might learn too much," said Jane, with a faint smile. "But for a dumb, gum-chewing stenographer— He must have some use for a stenographer."

"I don't follow you," frowned Rand.

"It's very simple, you goose. I shall get a job with Mr. Korbeck and work for you from the inside."

Rand threw back his head and laughed.

"I wouldn't dream of letting you do that, Jane. It's too dangerous."

"But, Barry, you just said there was nothing to be afraid of!"

"I know, dear, but—well—I won't hear of it."

There was a twinkle in Jane's blue eyes.

"And how do you propose to prevent it? Look here, Barry," and she was in dead earnest now, "we've been waiting a year for a chance. If you succeed in this job it will make our happiness, won't it? Do you think anything else matters to me?

"Perhaps I can help you in this, and if I can you can just bet that I will chuck everything else. Don't you suppose it means enough to me to run a little risk too?"

Rand looked across at her and there was a new gleam of excitement in his eyes.

"We can't lose together," he said. "Oh, God, Jane, but you are certainly a brick!"

CHAPTER III.

INSIDE INFORMATION.

ZOBEL'S restaurant on Park Row is in the shadow of the elevated railroad not far from the drafty corridors of Brooklyn Bridge's Manhattan toe.

On the plate glass of the front window are ancient glyphs, a white porcelain certificate designed to testify to passers-by that the whipped cream pastries, the almond cake, the stuffed chicken necks, the pot roasts, the noodle soup, and the other savory foods prepared within are such as might decently have been offered to those men and women who followed Moses out of Egypt in the days when refrigeration was unknown to mankind.

Zobel serves to Jew and Gentile. Tammany politicians leave City Hall and go to Zobel's because there is no better place within a mile to get a satisfying meal; and, leaving it, go to confession to an Irish priest. Tough circulation gorillas of the tabloid newspapers eat Zobel's steaks, broiled by Mrs. Zobel, and then go up Park Row to the hideous specimen of mid-Victorian architecture that houses the old post office, to buy money orders to send to their old mothers.

Men of the cotton goods trade in Thomas Street risk their lives dodging the traffic of Broadway in order to take their luncheons from the marble-topped tables set against the Circassian walnut paneled walls of Zobel's.

Decidedly Zobel's kosher restaurant is not a thieves' den, and yet, two thieves were having a conference there as they devoured big portions of sour cream and vegetables.

One of these thieves wore a finely made watch strapped about a hairy muscular wrist. From the pressure of a swollen abdomen his vest gaped between the buttons so as to expose a bit of his linen just above the waistband of his trousers. His face was a fat mask in which his eyes glinted like two bits of agate ware set in unbaked dough.

He was a fat thief who pretended to himself, almost as carefully as he did to others, that he was not a thief, but an honest, hardworking foreman of the cleaning room of the wholesale fur establishment of his employer, John B. Conover, uptown in the Thirties, just off Seventh Avenue.

His name, Funk, Henry K. Funk,

was inscribed in the back of that watch he wore with the further information that it had been given to him as a memento of ten years of valuable service to Conover & Co.

"Like I tell you, Korbeck," said Funk in a whining voice to his table companion, "I been working like a slave for ten years and he gives me a watch. Why not an interest in the business? But for me—phooey! What's the use?"

He broke off as if in disgust at the futility of trying to express his disappointment in words.

"You have been a sucker long enough."

The other man spoke with decision. He was a tall man whose white hair suggested more years than he had lived, but whose narrow slit of twisted mouth in a puffy face only half told the story of his meanness of soul.

"Yes, sir, a sucker long enough," repeated Korbeck in a tone an uncle might take with a beloved, foolish nephew. "With your intelligence you should be a rich man."

"Don't I know it?" complained Funk. "And what have I got? A wrist watch! Who can blame me if I sweetened my pay from time to time by sewing a piece of sable inside my coat before leaving that shop after a hard day's work?"

"I don't blame you for that," said Korbeck, putting emphasis on the last word. "I blame you for not getting a bigger share of profits you helped to earn.

"I like my friends to have money so's we can all have a good time. That's why I've taken some of those skins off your hands.

"But I want you to have a lot of money. I'll be going down to Florida before long. I'd like nothing better than to have a congenial companion like yourself and I have to be deprived of your companionship because you've been working like a slave for years and getting nowhere.

"I'll tell you what I'm going to do: I'm going to carry you in the market for a couple of hundred shares of steel."

"But—"

"Not a word, now! I'll use my money and charge you six per cent interest for it when I turn over your profits. It's a rising market. Money's easy to make when you already have money."

"Say, that'll be swell," approved Funk.

Now Funk was stupid, but not as stupid as his easy acceptance of Korbeck's words implied.

He knew without allowing the thought to come to the surface of his mind that Korbeck was offering him some easy money in return for something Funk was in a position to give: And Korbeck, fox that he was, knew that Funk was waiting to learn the price of the easy money.

"Another cup coffee, waiter," commanded Korbeck, chiefly because he wished to send that functionary out of hearing.

"In four-five weeks, Funk," he went on temptingly, "you'll know what it is to have some real money, to have waiters at the Ritz jump when you snap your fingers, to have a big automobile and maybe a chauffeur and," he lowered his voice and whispered a word behind his hand.

"Aw, gowan," chided Funk in a fog of embarrassment that he found enjoyable.

"Say, by the way," remarked Korbeck, "I got to make some changes in the burglar alarm system up to my warehouse. These furriers got pretty good systems, I understand.

"Maybe you could tell me something about the arrangements at Conover's; any little extra precautions that are taken there, for instance?"

Korbeck began to stir his second cup of coffee as carefully as if it was nitroglycerine and himself a chemist.

Funk glanced at that watch on his

wrist. Possibly in his mind's eye he saw that inscription "for faithful service." Possibly the recollection of those words made him pause, but the pause was a briefer interval of time than could be measured on that wrist watch.

"No," said Funk, "Conover just uses the regular burglar alarm system that rings a signal up in the headquarters of the Watson Private Watchman Agency when it goes off. There's nothing beyond that except the heavy padlocks on the cabinet in which he keeps the raw sables."

Korbeck simulated a yawn as if to pretend that he was uninterested in this bit of information for which he had been maneuvering.

"How about the rear?" he asked.

He put the question as casually as one asking simply to be polite.

"Well," said Funk righteously, "I've been telling Conover a long time now that unless he puts that wired lattice clear across the rear wall of the shop he's going to be cleaned out some time.

"But does he ever take my advice? Not him."

"Funny he doesn't think it is just as necessary to protect the rear of his shop as the front. Anybody who needed some sables wouldn't be too proud to go around to the rear.

"Is the rear open to the other street?"

"There's a passageway, a brick tunnel like, where they used to take the ashes out from the cellar of that vacant building."

"Vacant, huh? I guess maybe they're going to put up another skyscraper in there before long.

"Anybody that buys Manhattan property and keeps it is bound to get rich. Look at the Astors. Getting richer all the time just because they never sell real estate, or hardly ever. Do they keep a watchman in that building?"

"I see an old nigger back there puttering around sometimes, but that's all. 'At's what I told the boss.

"'Some time,' I said to him, 'some time that old nigger's going to discover the burglar alarm lattice does not cover the two foot of wall under the window ledge, knock a hole in the wall with a crowbar, come crawling in and help himself to a fortune.'

"And what did Conover say to me? 'Funk,' he says, 'that nigger hasn't enough energy in him to do all that work. Besides, what's insurance for?'"

"Carry much insurance?"

"About one hundred and fifty thousand dollars' worth and seven months out of the year he's got at least that much stock there."

It was then that Morris Korbeck, who had been picking his teeth behind a cupped hand in what he assumed was a polite manner, signaled the waiter to give him the check.

"Don't forget about that stock now, Funk," he said by way of farewell. "I'm going to make some money for you."

And Funk, the traitor, pretended to himself that Morris Korbeck was just a good friend imbued with the spirit of Santa Claus.

CHAPTER IV.

STRICTLY BUSINESS.

THE Greek candy store on the first floor of the building on Second Avenue that housed the Elite Pool Parlor was a comparatively respectable enterprise.

The proprietor of the Elite Pool Parlor was a brother of that Hadrian Euthopopolis who owned the Greek candy store, but the relationship long ago had ceased to bring the brothers any comfort.

Second Avenue knew the proprietor of the Elite Pool Parlor as Nick the Grik, a person whom it was dangerous to cross. The police knew him

as one who was quick to reward any visiting detective with a package of cigarettes or a cigar and were correspondingly suspicious.

Decent folks, and sometimes indecent ones, patronized the soda fountain and sweet shop of Hadrain Euthopopolis; but decent folks never had any dealings with that other member of the Euthopopolis family upstairs called Nick the Grik.

About twenty minutes after Morris Korbeck had taken leave of Henry K. Funk, foreman of John Conover's wholesale fur establishment, Korbeck mounted the dark stairway that leads up into the Elite Pool Parlor.

Only one of the six pool tables in that establishment was in use when Korbeck walked into the long chamber with its brown linoleum covered floor patterned with cuspidors and the scars of cigarette burns. It was growing dark so that at first Korbeck saw only the figure of the youth who leaned into the pyramid of yellow light flung downward onto the green cloth of the table as he prepared to drive his cue ball into the triangle of tightly clustered targets. But Nick the Grik saw Korbeck immediately and hurried to meet him.

"Come downstairs and sit in my automobile for a talk," said Korbeck quietly.

"Sure," agreed Nick, "just wait down there until I lock the cash register."

In the automobile Nick the Grik, nee Euthopopolis, said nothing, which was a thing he did very well.

"I haven't much time," apologized Korbeck, "so here's the dope: I could make a nice profit on some furs, sables, squirrels, seal skins, if I had 'em. Do you happen to know where I can get any?"

"Well," temporized Nick the Grik, "let me think now."

After some two minutes of silence Korbeck seemingly decided that Nick the Grik was not thinking so very well, so he primed him with a bit of conversation.

"There's a fellow named Conover in the Thirties, between Sixth and Seventh Avenues, got a stock just about the size I require."

"You don't say?"

"Yes; just exactly what I need. Still—"

"These crash jobs ain't so much fun."

"Funny thing about this bird. There's no burglar alarm lattice under the windows at the rear of his place and a brick passageway there connects with the street to the north. Runs through a vacant building that's going to be torn down. An old smoke watchman hangs around there nights. I never knew one that wouldn't take a drink if you offered him a bottle."

"Lemme see now," pondered Nick the Grik aloud, "this is Thursday, ain't it?"

It is not a matter of record that any of the Greeks of old spoke quite as Nick did, but then, Nick was more of an American than he was a Greek. He was born in New York and he did not say, precisely, "Thursday." What he said sounded like "Thoisday," but Korbeck understood him quite well.

"Yes," he agreed, "this is Thursday, and that loft region in the Thirties is dead quiet on Saturday nights and Sundays."

"Will you be at the warehouse early Monday?" asked Nick the Grik abruptly.

"Surest thing you know. I'll be there all day. Why?"

"Oh, nothing except I think maybe I may have some furs for you."

"What kind of tools would any one need to bust a hole in an old brick wall and then to open up a metal cabinet with heavy padlocks?"

"How should I know that?" sneered Nick the Grik in a manner he intended to be pleasant. "I'll see you Monday."

Morris Korbeck decided at that moment to call his efforts a day's work,

and so he pointed his car uptown and drove home to his apartment in Central Park West. Mr. Korbeck lived well; that is, he pampered his stomach and kept a Japanese valet to look after his clothing.

CHAPTER V.

THE PRIDE OF AN ARTIST.

NICK THE GRIK felt a pride in his work that in any other profession than that of thief would have been called only honest pride. His pool parlor gave him a background. It was an institution to which he could point whenever any one in authority might ask what he did for a living.

It was also, in its way, a kind of civic center; at least the men and youths who used it as a sort of club were marshaled by Nick on Election Day and sent to the polls, there to mark their ballots according to the instructions sent out from the big headquarters.

Nick, because of this frail alliance he had formed with political power, knew that he was immune to punishment whenever he got into minor difficulties. He felt quite free to "obey that impulse" whenever it was a suggestion to sock an unruly client of the pool parlor on the jaw, a bit of the human anatomy which was listed in Nick's vocabulary as "jawr."

But Nick knew also that if ever the police labeled him "burglar" his free and easy days would be over. Nick, therefore, had adopted as a principle a rule of conduct that was to govern him in any tight situations into which he might be caught in the pursuit of his avocation, and his avocation was burglary.

Nick broke lofts in response to the same kind of impulses that make some persons collect postage stamps and impel others to buy the artistic productions of men of genius. Burglary was Nick's hobby.

Under certain conditions, Nick had determined he would kill before he would submit to capture. As an earnest of his feeling Nick invariably set out on adventures connected with his hobby wearing a forty-five automatic pistol slung from a holster under his left armpit.

It was a weapon for which Nick had developed a warm regard when he had been instructed in its use at Yaphank, Long Island, when caught in the last draft of the war. An old army sergeant, too old by far to go overseas, one who had been middle-aged when he first went to the Philippines to help capture Aguinaldo and put down the insurrectionists, had been Nick's instructor.

"This here is a sweet gun, lad," the sergeant had said. "Take it in your right hand now and feel its balance. You want to remember when your fist is wrapped around this bit of steel that it is the most deadly thing of its kind at the present moment—if you get the hang of it."

"Show me how it works," Nick had asked.

"Take your time, lad," said the sergeant, "and remember when you're shooting this never blink your eyes and always squeeze the trigger. If I ever see you jerk that trigger I'll shoot you myself."

So Nick had been grateful for the chance that had put him into the S. O. S. and dedicated him to the task of driving a truck.

"A rifle now," Nick had speculated, "wouldn't be much good in the city, but this baby, that old bird says, will knock a man down when it hits him. He says the army adopted it because they needed a gun that would stop dead in their tracks guys crazy with religion who were swinging swords.

"I guess I will adopt one of these myself."

When Nick was mustered out he had one of those forty-five automatics mustered with him. Quite unofficially, of

course. He simply lifted one on an occasion when a second lieutenant was careless.

CHAPTER VI.

CRASHING A LOFT.

THREE days after his conversation with Korbeck and following certain preliminary investigations of his own Nick spoke with one of his associates in the pool room.

"I want five of you birds to-night," Nick announced.

In the newspapers a gangster's associates are usually referred to as confederates, which is a libel on a sacred word; or as other thugs, or in some other way that strangely avoids the proper connotation. The right word is friend.

A burglar mob is usually bound together by the loose fetters of friendship, not a very lasting tie as a rule in spite of all that poets have written, but a firm one while it lives.

"It's a fur job," explained Nick. "Can we get Owen to go with us? He knows the fur racket like I know pool balls."

"I'll ast him."

"And how about that plumber's helper across the street? We got to get through a wall. We need crowbars."

"I'll ast him."

"No. Don't ast him. Tell him I want to see him."

"All right."

This particular friend of Nick was pitted with the scars of smallpox and chewed incessantly, not tobacco, which is the attribute of supposedly tough men, but chewing gum.

"Now," prompted Nick, "we'll need a car, so go out and pick one up. Get a Caddy, and be back here with it by eleven o'clock, ready to start."

At eleven Nick's manner was that of the anxious host attending to all the details of a poker party, rather than that what the general public and stage directors believe to be the pre-crime manner of a head burglar.

At five minutes past eleven Nick was relieved to hear through the side windows of his abbey the unmistakable sound of that particular eight cylindered car which he and like minded persons favor for daring work that sometimes requires reliable speed.

"Come on, you fellows," ordered Nick, to four youths who were as self-conscious as if they had been going to a ball where they would meet only their social superiors. "Let's move."

As he led the clattering squad down the narrow flight of wooden stairs to the street, Nick's breast was filled with a feeling like that which has exalted leaders of men in all sorts of enterprises since the first raid of one group of cave men on some of their fellows. The ability to feel it, to taste intoxication from its blood tingling quality is that thing which is variously called leadership, executive ability and bossiness. Nick had it in a virulent form.

He loved authority so well he sometimes spoke pleasantly to people he would have preferred to curse.

"Stop by Lefty's room on Third Avenue, Johnny," said Nick to his smallpox friend. "Lefty's tools are there, and take your time. We got two nights and a day to do this job.

"I sent Harry on ahead to get acquainted with a smoke watchman. If he can cook the watchman with the bottle I gave him we won't even have to whisper on this job.

"This is gonna be good. There'll be a fur coat for everybody's frail. And real jack!"

Nick was beginning to feel some of that enthusiasm for his work that made the risks of such undertakings seem mild in contrast. That lusty hunger that on occasion drives all of us out to look for buried treasure, to get something for nothing, was working in his blood like a ferment.

The car, after traversing the nar-

row streets of the dingy region below Greenwich Village, swung under the Washington Arch and into Fifth Avenue.

The people in other cars that passed them were, for the most part, bound on pleasure excursions somewhat less sinister than that which occupied the mind of Nick the Grik, but the behavior of this burglar and his companions was quite like that of any other group that rode in a good automobile on Fifth Avenue.

"Hey, look," said Nick suddenly, addressing his friend at the wheel whose gum chewing caused his derby hat to ride up and down as though it were an unskilled equestrian bumping along a bridle path. "What did you do about the license plates? Maybe there's a rap out about this car."

The derby hat ceased to post for a couple of car lengths as its wearer mustered words for a reply.

"Aw, for crying out loud," he retorted finally. "You're always bellyaching about the license plates. Didn't I tell you I 'tended to everything?

"I dropped the plates that was on this car in a street cleaner's cart over in Delancey Street. I've had these plates for a month. Got 'em myself and you can bet on it, there's no rap out on these plates.

"If we was riding behind glass now, a cop might think it was funny, but the kind of pans we wear can buzz along in an open car and never get a tumble."

"All right, Johnny, I just didn't want to take any extra chances. No fun spending easy dough for lawyers."

Nick spoke soothingly as he might have spoken to a dog after chiding it unjustly.

Soon after they passed the Waldorf Astoria Hotel the pockmarked chauffeur, Johnny, expertly made a left hand turn into one of the side streets in the Thirties. They crossed Broadway through a swarm of taxicabs that were swirling up into the theatrical district.

"It's right along here," warned Nick, and the car slowed up. "I want to take a look at the front of the place and then we'll go around into the next street and blow for Harry.

"I hope that smoke was a drinking nigger. Harry could lay him out with a billy all right, but what's the use? The easiest way is the best way."

Nick's earnest manner of speaking was precisely like that of a business man discussing with an associate the best way of dealing with labor troubles.

Johnny caused the automobile to squawk as if it had been a gigantic barnyard fowl. In response to that signal a figure suddenly stepped from the shadows.

"There's Harry, now," whispered Nick and Johnny guided the car to an almost silent stop at the curb where their picket waited.

"One of you get out and come in," invited Harry, a squat figure of a man unlike the others in that he was decidedly shabby. "I got the dinge to sleep as peacefully as if he was a little baby.

"Three swallows of that stuff you gave me, Nick, and he was babbling. What did you put in it? Huh?"

Nick ignored the question but got out of the automobile.

"Keep driving, Johnny," he ordered. "Don't make the same turn twice; but every time you pass here stop and let out a man. That makes three stops.

"Then you must wait at the corner of Sixth Avenue. If anybody wants to know what you are waiting for, any cop, that is, what are you going to tell him?"

"Why," retorted Johnny glibly, "I'm waiting for a man that gave me a dollar to watch his car."

"To the head of the class, kid, to the head of the class. Le'me have that box now while the street is clear."

Somebody handed him a violin case that seemed strangely heavy for the

container of such a fragile instrument, and like a shadow Nick faded through the arch of the passageway beside an untenanted office building.

The odors of ashes, of machine oil and of bolts of cloth and of yet other odors that assailed his nostrils in that dark and drafty corridor were for Nick the smells of adventure. Alice in Wonderland never turned a corner with more of anticipation in her eyes than did Nick, but Alice in the corridors of the rabbit hole never clutched a forty-five automatic with murderous purpose.

This Harry Sherill leading the way, who had succeeded in giving the negro night watchman drinks of doped liquor, had made sure there was no one to be feared in the bottom of the light court into which this passage led, but Nick had in the bottom of his soul much of that spirit that makes the Boy Scouts a popular organization.

Decidedly Nick was not a Boy Scout and yet on occasions he did a good deed. He could feel as virtuously warm inside as any philanthropist that ever lived when he dropped a small coin in a blind beggar's cup.

It was as dark in that court as the inside of a fountain pen. Nick produced an electric torch, one of those short rods of which the makers still refer to erroneously as flash lights. They are torches, and with his Nick threw a cone of silvery light into every ultra dark place in that courtyard in which a living thing might have been harbored.

As the light swept this way and that he photographed every detail of the place on a memory that may have been exceptionally retentive because it had never been seriously overburdened with the sort of things most of us are inclined to swallow into our minds.

"That's the unprotected stretch of wall along there?" said Nick questioningly.

"Sure," said Harry.

"Why 'sure'?"

"Say, you brung me because I was an electrician, di'n't you?"

"Yeah."

"Well, then, it's an electrician 'at's telling you that wall ain't protected. They don't never wall no burglar alarm lattice on places like that. They don't figure anybody wants to work that hard."

A step sounded in the passageway.

Nick turned to face the sound. The heavy automatic was snuggled in his hand, his thumb tensely ready to snap back the blunt hammer.

"Who's 'at?" he growled.

"Me."

"Quick! Who is it?"

"It's Lefty."

"Why in 'ell di'nt you say so? I was just about to plug you."

A part of Nick's pleasure in his burglar expeditions came from just such experiences. He had all the delight of a cat with her claws extended over a mouse.

He had known with that first "me" that it was Lefty; he had sensed it even before the plumber's helper had spoken. But there is something of the play-actor in all young burglars.

Against a slightly different background he might have aspired to a career as a motion picture actor; or, in an earlier day to one as a star of melodrama. So, Nick had pretended to himself that Lefty's footsteps were those of the inevitable policeman he was going to kill some day. Lefty had given him an opportunity for rehearsal.

"We want to open up that wall," explained Nick. "Harry 'll show you."

In a few minutes the confined air of the court echoed the clink of metal against masonry.

"Not more than four rows of brick," Nick heard.

It was Harry cautioning the younger Lefty.

After an interval, during which Nick sniffed the odor of lime and brick dust, there was another step in the passageway.

"Chees't," he cautioned. The work stopped.

This time there were two members of the party.

"I thought I told you guys to come one at a time?" Nick spoke as truculently as any captain.

"Aw, these streets 's as dead as—"

"Well, take off your coats and pitch in there with Harry and Lefty.

"We're going right through the rear wall."

After about an hour and a half of work Harry raised his voice:

"My bar's through."

"Easy, then," cautioned Nick. "We don't want to set that alarm going after all this trouble."

The men worked feverishly for a time, spelling each other at rapid intervals and then:

"I can squeeze through, I think."

"Wait," objected Nick; "that 'll be my job. One of you—Harry, I guess—stand guard in this passageway."

Nick took off his coat, a garment from which he previously had removed every scrap of paper and identifying mark. Then, inserting his head, he began to drag himself through the narrow aperture.

The bricks, jagged with hard mortar, scraped the back of his neck and pressed into his chest. Dust filled his nostrils and lungs so that he had to pause to stifle an impulse to sneeze. A few wriggles and he was through and standing upright in the blackness of the interior of the Conover Fur Company's workrooms.

"Come on through, Resnic," he ordered through the hole in the wall. "You gotta pick out the good stuff. There's no use bothering with cheap skins."

Piled about him in an atmosphere redolent of strong disinfectants and less pleasant odors that spoke of thousands of lingering deaths in the woods of Canada, of Russia, of Asia, there were great mounds of dressed sealskins; barrels filled with the tiny hides of gray squirrels; the furs of martens, of beavers, of black foxes.

The real prizes were stored in a steel cabinet that offered only brief resistance to the pressure of the crowbars passed into the building.

"Now, then, Resnic," invited Nick, "you pass along the good stuff and I'll hand it outside."

"We'll make the first load a good one," said Resnic, in a husky whine. "The stuff in this cabinet is mostly sable. On Fifth Avenue they would bring—"

As he handled them Nick thought from time to time of the women these soft pelts were destined to infold; and he thought of Korbeck.

"If he tries to gyp me on this deal, I'll—"

Nick fondled the butt of his automatic.

It was nine o'clock in the morning before he tumbled into bed. All of his little gang of friends had agreed to meet him again on Sunday evening to assist in the further looting of the Conover establishment.

Five times they had filled the automobile with sacks of furs. Resnic had estimated that there were enough remaining to fill the car twice more.

"To-night," thought Nick, before he fell asleep, "we'll finish the job."

But when night came only Harry, the electrician, and pockmarked Johnny kept the appointment on time.

"Yellow?" inquired Nick, as Lefty and the other two strolled into his pool room late Sunday evening.

"Yellow nothing," retorted Lefty, in a tone that he hoped would make an effective denial without going to the point of enraging Nick. "Resnic says we got all the good stuff, and besides that nigger's probably given an alarm."

"Aw, that nigger 'll still be sleeping to-morrow morning, I bet you. But if the furs left aren't worth much there is no need of going back. No use pressing our luck.

"Besides, I'm going to be busy seeing we don't lose any of the good stuff through the guy that's packing this stuff at the drop off."

CHAPTER VII.

"SANTA CLAUS" AT WORK.

RAND drew thoughtfully on his cigarette and stared at Jane, who was curled up in the corner of the couch in her apartment.

"There's no way to get you a job at Korbeck's without creating a position especially for you," he said. "Somehow we'll have to get the girl who has the job now fired. That seems like a dirty trick. She probably needs the money badly."

"But we must get on the inside somehow, Barry," Jane pointed out. "How are you going to find out who Korbeck's confederates are? You simply must have some one there who can keep in close touch with his movements."

Rand frowned.

"I hate like the devil having you mix up in this, Jane. Somehow I'm afraid—"

"Now, don't be a goose," she interrupted. "We've been over this a dozen times. I'm going to do it, and that's that. Look here, instead of getting the girl down there fired, why not find a better job for her?"

"But, my dear girl, haven't we both been trying to get jobs for ourselves for a year without any luck? How do you expect to get one for some one else?"

"You forget that you have an ally in Mr. Hamilton, Barry. Don't you suppose, for the sake of your scheme, he could find something for her at Atlas, even if he had to pay her beyond her actual value to the company? Did he not say you might draw on him for any money you needed? This might really fall under the heading of 'expense account.'"

"By Jove!" cried Rand, slapping the arm of his chair. "That's it! But how will we get her to take the job?"

"Offer her more money."

"But I can't just walk into Korbeck's office and tell her I've got a job for her."

"Of course not. Scrape up an acquaintance with her. Get her to talk about her present position. She's probably dissatisfied with it.

"Every one, or nearly every one I know, seems dissatisfied with their jobs. When she tells you her particular pet grudge, you can spring the idea of a new opening."

"Jane, you're a wonder. To-morrow we start the campaign of the century. Look here, what about some scrambled eggs now?"

"You'll turn into an egg, Barry."

But she tucked an apron around her waist and headed for the kitchenette.

The next morning about eleven Morris Korbeck left his office to transact some business uptown. He had been out a matter of scarcely three minutes when a young man breezed in.

Rand had been waiting all morning for Korbeck to leave. He wanted a chance at his secretary alone. His hat was pushed back on his head in a jaunty fashion and he smoked a cigarette in the drooping manner of the drug store cowboy.

Miss Zazu Groehl, Korbeck's secretary, glanced at him as he came in, shifted her gum to the other cheek, and went back to her typing.

"You Korbeck's secretary?" demanded Rand.

"Yeah."

"The boss in?"

"No."

"Hell," said Rand, sitting down on the edge of her desk. "Been trying to locate him for a week."

"Book agent?" asked Miss Groehl.

"Insurance," Rand confided.

"Say," drawled Miss Groehl, "you got a swell chance! That guy eats insurance agents."

"You mean he's hard to deal with, eh?"

"Hard? Say, you better beat it while you're still all together."

Rand eyed her shrewdly.

"Makes you work pretty hard, does he?"

Miss Groehl raised her eyebrows and chewed vehemently on her gum for a moment.

"Do you think I'd be stickin' here with this slave driver if the pay wasn't good? Gawd, that baby don't know a thing about takin' it easy."

Rand looked incredulous.

"I never heard they paid very good salaries in this business," he said. "Would it be an impertinence to ask how much you're getting?"

"Yeah, it would."

Rand grinned.

"Well, I guess you couldn't knock down more than twenty a week at this sort of thing."

"Twenty a week!" Miss Groehl was incensed. "Twenty a week! Say, buddy, I'm the boss's private secretary, I am. I get twenty-seven fifty. And that reminds me, I'm busy.

"You better beat it, and don't try to sell nothing to Korbeck. He'll eat you up."

"Do you mean to tell me," said Rand slowly, "that you only get twenty-seven fifty?"

"What do you mean, 'only twenty-seven fifty'?"

"That's awful," said Rand, with a long face. "My gosh, I know a job that's open right now where you'd get thirty-five—to start."

Miss Groehl's eyes widened.

"Yeah?"

"Sure, and I'd be glad to give you the steer, if you want it."

"Say, I don't believe in Santa Claus, buddy. What do you want?"

"I don't want anything," Rand assured her. "I just heard of this job to-day. Up at Atlas Insurance. If you are interested, I'll call up the boss right now."

Miss Groehl looked uncertain. She didn't believe in philanthropy.

"I can't dope this out," she said.

Rand picked up the phone from her desk with a good-natured smile. Miss Groehl watched him closely.

"I'll call up the boss," he said.

Which he proceeded to do.

A few moments later he heard Hamilton at the other end.

"This is Rand. Is that job still open?"

"What job?" asked Hamilton.

"That's great!" breezed Rand. "I have just the girl for it."

"Say, what the devil!"

"I was right about the salary, wasn't I? Thirty-five a week?"

"Look here, Rand," sputtered Hamilton, "what the devil are you talking about?"

"You say she can start to-morrow at nine?" said Rand. "Fine! I'll send her up. By the way, could I see you in an hour or so?"

"Yes," snapped Hamilton, "and you'll have some tall explaining to do!"

Rand hung up the receiver and turned to Miss Groehl with a satisfied smile.

"Hamilton and I are old friends," he explained. "You start to-morrow morning at thirty-five a week. How does that suit you?"

Miss Groehl chewed excitedly.

"Certainly is swell of you."

"Don't mention it. By the way, how'd you come to get your job here?"

"Through the Star Agency," she explained.

"Gee, that dump? Does Korbeck hire all his people through them?"

"Yeah. They done pretty good by him."

Rand got up casually.

"Well, glad to of done you the turn, kid. You be at Atlas to-morrow at nine. So long."

And he ambled out. He had accomplished his purpose. The girl would leave and he had learned where Korbeck hired his people.

Not quite an hour later Rand was ushered into old man Hamilton's private office. The chief executive of the Atlas Company was in a rare mood.

As Rand came in he clamped his teeth together over the end of a badly mutilated cigar, leaned forward aggressively in his chair, and said:

"Well, young man!"

Rand pulled up a chair.

"I'm sorry, sir, about that call. I was in something of a jam and I had to get my point across."

"But what job were you talking about?"

"Look here, sir. I'm trying to get a friend of mine, my fiancée as a matter of fact, situated in Korbeck's office. The whole proposition looks hopeless unless I can get some one on the inside to help me.

"The only way to get her the job was to get the girl who holds it now out. I had to make her a proposition for more money. I counted on you to help me. She is coming here to-morrow at nine."

Hamilton grinned and made a note on a pad.

"I'll fix it up," he said.

Then his face assumed a more serious expression and he picked up a copy of the morning paper, which lay on his desk.

"Seen the paper this morning?"

"No, sir. I was down at Korbeck's at the crack of dawn waiting for a chance to see that girl alone."

Hamilton passed over the paper and indicated a penciled headline.

"One of our clients," he explained.

Rand read:

$200,000 FUR ROBBERY.

John B. Conover looted of entire stock. Thieves effect entrance through only spot unprotected by burglar alarm. Police have evidence which will lead to early arrests.

"There are two inaccurate statements in that heading," said Hamilton. "Conover only carries one hundred and fifty thousand dollars in insurance, so you can bet your last nickel that there wasn't more than that amount of stock on hand.

"Probably the loss isn't more than seventy-five thousand dollars. The other inaccuracy is that about the police."

"How so?"

"Did you ever see an account of a crime that didn't explain that the police had clews?" asked Hamilton dryly.

"You think this is some of Korbeck's work?" asked Rand.

Hamilton shrugged.

"I don't know. It's a big enough job for him to tackle. But of course he had nothing to do with the actual theft, and you can bet he'll be thoroughly protected in the deal."

"What's my next move, then?"

"That's for you to decide," said Hamilton. "But one thing is a cinch. You've got to find out who's working for Korbeck.

"You haven't got the usual way to find out, either. The police have stool pigeons that are sometimes effective. You have nothing but your own native intelligence.

"I should say you'd have to go down and fit yourself into the atmosphere."

Rand nodded.

"I think you're right."

Hamilton regarded the end of his cigar thoughtfully before he spoke again.

"You said something about your fiancée taking this job at Korbeck's. You realize the danger, of course. Does she?"

"To succeed in this means everything to both of us," said Rand. "She's game, Mr. Hamilton."

Hamilton smiled, a trifle wistfully.

"I'd like to meet that girl. There are all too few women who are willing to run any risk to held their men. You're a lucky scoundrel, Rand."

"Thank you, sir. And now I think I'll be off. Perhaps I can pick up some dope about this Conover business."

"Don't forget to call on me if you

need help," said Hamilton. "And I'll take care of your little stenographer friend in the morning. Thirty-five a week, you said?"

"Right."

"Well, good luck, boy."

CHAPTER VIII.

TWO MEN AND A GIRL.

IT was not quite half past eight on Tuesday morning when Nick Euthopopolis swaggered into the office of the Empire Storage and Hauling Company. That is pretty early to attempt to transact business in New York outside of the food markets, but it was not too early for Morris Korbeck. That astute fence was at his glass-topped desk, yelling into a telephone:

"And why should I pay the Westchester Pad Company thirty-five dollars for seventy-two by eighty cut size pads when I can get 'em, better ones, from the Connecticut Quilt and Pad Company for thirty dollars?"

There was a moment of silence, during which Korbeck's eyes almost seemed to emerge like a crab's, due to his excess of emotion.

"Listen," he cried hysterically, "I send you my check for twenty pads at thirty-one dollars or you can come and get the shipment. What? All right, I'll send the check."

Korbeck hung up the receiver and swiveled about in his chair. Then he saw Nick.

"What are you doing here?" His voice was cold, cruel.

"Look, I got some stuff coming up here from the Sterling Fur Company. That's the drop-off, understand?

"I know you won't do business direct with me, but there's no shennanigan goes with me, either. The Sterling Fur Company's good enough for you. They got an office and a bookkeeper's desk and everything. They packed this stuff in old boxes like you wanted it."

"Well, what do you want then?"

"I want to watch the inventory of this stuff made, see? I want to see these furs counted. That's all—counted. Then we'll all know whereat we stand."

"Sure, that's fair enough," said Korbeck. "But you must have nothing to do with the papers to be signed."

"Say, fellow, try and get me to sign anything. Try and get me to."

Nick's gesture accompanying this proposal was a stiff wave of his hand, palm down. In years gone by kings have used that same gesture as a signal to henchmen to deliver a subject to the executioners.

"What I want from this Sterling Fur Company," Korbeck added, "is a letter signed by an official of the company and dated two years ago, putting the furs in storage. Then I want another letter from them saying these furs that have been in my warehouse for two years are for sale and would I like to buy 'em. Then I want a receipt in full and a bill of sale."

"I think I get you," said Nick, "and I hand it to you, you're slick."

"Ain't I, though?"

Korbeck's acknowledgment of the compliment was like that of a small boy confessing an uncanny skill at mumble-de-peg.

A truck backfired in the loading corridor of the warehouse, and Nick strode over to the window.

"There's the stuff now," he said. "One, two, eleven, fourteen, yep, it's all there, fourteen packing cases."

Nick's hand was on the doorknob when he paused and said:

"Say, when do I get mine, and how much?"

"I give you five thousand dollars this morning and the rest when I sell the furs. Better than that I can't do."

"Make it six grand," urged Nick. "There was six in the mob and a grand apiece will keep 'em quiet for awhile. When you sell the stuff how much more do I get?"

"Well, that depends on how much I sell 'em for," said Korbeck shrewdly. "But you can trust me."

"How much do you think?" persisted Nick.

"Oh, maybe ten thousand dollars; maybe fifteen thousand dollars. I'm taking a big risk."

"The hell you are. I'm taking the risk, and there's a hundred grand of fur in those boxes."

Nick strode petulantly into the outer office with Korbeck at his heels, protesting that the furs would have to be fed into the market slowly.

"I thought you said you had a buyer for 'em?" said Nick suspiciously.

"When he sees the stuff he may be a buyer," fenced Korbeck.

Then he saw a strange girl standing in the outer office, and he stopped.

"You want to see me?" he demanded.

"Are you Mr. Korbeck?"

"Yeah. What of it?"

"I wanted to ask you—"

"Wait," snapped Korbeck. "I got to see that those guys unload that stuff in the right place."

He strode past Nick and Jane—for it was she—and out of the office.

Nick regarded this unusually pretty girl with a leering sort of smile. Languidly he lit a cigarette.

"What do you want with Korbeck?" he demanded.

"I heard he needed a new secretary."

Nick's eyes widened in pleasurable surprise.

"You wanna work for Korbeck, eh? Not bad, not half bad, you ain't. Maybe you should want a little lunch some time?"

For a moment Jane was angry, but then a rather significant fact occurred to her.

Here was a tough looking customer who did business with Morris Korbeck before the regular office hours. It might be well to find out something about him.

"I don't even know your name," she protested.

"That's easy—or maybe it ain't. Nick Euthopopolis. Jest call me Nick. The last one's a mouthful. I run the best pool parlor in New York, and believe me I know how to order the hot groceries any time you want to stoke up a bit."

"Perhaps if I get the job—"

"That's the right dope, kiddo. I treats all the skirts on the level. You'll be glad to know me, mebbe! So long."

At this point Korbeck reëntered. At sight of Nick his eyes flashed.

"What are you hanging around here for?" he snapped. "I told you a dozen times I won't have it. When I want to see you I'll come down to your place. Now beat it!"

"Aw, hell!" growled Nick.

But he slouched out of the office.

"Well?" Korbeck turned sharply on Jane.

"My name is Campbell," she said. "Your secretary, Miss Groehl, has decided to leave. She called up the Star Agency, and they sent me down."

"Can you do quick work—and how much salary do you want?"

"I have a good deal of experience," she told him. "I'd be willing to work for a little less until I got to know your business—say, twenty dollars."

This figure which she and Rand had settled on the night before had the expected effect.

It pleased Korbeck.

"I'll give you a try. Can you start now?"

"Of course."

"Come and take a letter."

The rest of the morning was uneventful. The work was routine and quite usual. Jane found nothing that in any way roused her suspicion. At noon she called Rand at his university club, according to a prearranged plan.

"I got the job," she told him. "I have already started. As yet I've seen nothing. I've got one name for you, though.

"A man named Nick Euthopopolis, who runs a pool parlor somewhere, was here doing business with Korbeck before nine o'clock."

"Fine," said Rand. "That gives us another angle to start on. It may be nothing of course but we'll ride it for a bit. See you to-night unless something turns up. Good-by, dear."

Now, Morris Korbeck was not as casual in the hiring of his employees as his quick engaging of Jane might indicate.

No sooner had she left the office for lunch than he called up the Star Agency.

"This Campbell girl you sent down, she has good references?"

"We sent no one down," they told him.

"What?"

"We didn't know you wanted any one."

"But didn't my other girl call you up?"

"No."

"Thanks."

Korbeck snapped down the receiver. His eyes were narrowed into little steel beads.

So there was something crooked about this?

He called another number and waited patiently. Presently there came an answer from the other end.

"Send Meeker up here, and damned quick," he ordered.

Meeker was the one man with whom Korbeck had dealings that he trusted implicitly. This trust was not born of an old childhood friendship or a business partnership. It was a much surer thing than that.

Korbeck knew some very definite things about Meeker that would send that gentleman up the river for a considerable period of time. Thus Korbeck felt confident that Meeker could be intrusted with anything of importance.

Meeker had seen better days. He hated Korbeck cordially, but he recognized the fact that he was in a trap and that his only salvation lay in obeying the hated one.

A few moments after the phone call he arrived.

"You sent for me," he said quietly. Meeker was tall and thin, with a heavily lined face, and brown hair that was graying around the temples. He had long, sensitive fingers that played nervously with his cap.

"Yeah. I want you should do a little shadowing job," said Korbeck.

"Who?"

"Look, my secretary leaves me yesterday suddenly. To-day a girl comes in. She says that Groehl, that's the first girl, telephoned the agency where I always hire my girls, and told 'em I needed one.

"She looked O K, so I took her on. Just now I call up the agency to ask about her references." Korbeck spread his hands. "The agency didn't send her."

Meeker shifted his balance from one foot to the other.

"Why not fire her? Probably just a friend of the other girl."

Korbeck was too astute.

"She ain't the type. No, it looks fishy. I won't fire her—I'd be a fool. Maybe she's here to spy on me for some one. I want to find out who that some one is. See?"

Meeker nodded.

"That ought to be easy."

"Yeah, and you got to do it." Korbeck pounded on his desk with a hard fist. "And when I find out, I know how to deal with 'em.

"No one can pull a game like this on me and get away with it—not while they're still making guns that shoot straight."

Then he leaned back in his chair and a slow smile twisted his crooked mouth.

"But she ain't a bad looking girl, Meeker. Not bad at all."

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

Fired and Hired

By HOWARD DWIGHT SMILEY

A NOVELETTE—COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE

This jobless cowboy had a pocketful of money, which he promptly swapped for a wagonload of action

EARLY one morning the ranch foreman and I had a little argument down back of the horse corral. What it was all about ain't got nothing to do with this story, but the boss delivered himself thusly:

"Rawhide, yo're the best all-round cow hand that ever rode for this outfit, and I sure need good men. But this is just a little bit more than I can take from you or any other man, savvy? Now, you go eat yore breakfast and then come over to the office and get yore time, after which you drift—and good-by and be damned to you!"

Which is how come I rode into Sudden City that morning atop my own cayuse, with three months' wages in my pocket and not a care or responsibility in the world.

Jessie hawse cast a shoe coming in, and our first stop was at the blacksmith shop. While Doc Lucas was putting on a new one I took a slant at his back yard. Doc must 'a' opened shop about the time the first pony express went through, and it looked like he'd collected and saved every relic that had come his way in the interval.

There was all kinds of junk, from a mule shoe to an old Concord coach—a majestic relic of the old days before Hank Ford and the railroads put that method of travel into the discard.

Over at one end of the collection was an ancient buckboard, weather-beaten and rusty, its wheels warped and wabbly, but still standing gamely, a monument over its own grave.

Doc had just finished the shoe job when Asa Benton came r'aring in, all dolled up like a wedding breakfast and dripping perspiration and vituperation.

"Say, Doc," he hollered, "I wish you'd come over and see what ails my car! The darn starter won't work, and I've been cranking her till I'm black in the face. Me and the missus is all set for our trip to the Coast, but we can't get started."

So we all went over to fix Asa's car. It was just across the way, and I strung along, having plenty of time on my hands and nothing particular to use it for.

Asa was a retired cowman who had sold off his ranch holdings and moved into town. He was getting old and did not ride much after he quit the cow game, but used to traipse around the country in a top buggy, buying calves, just to keep his hand in.

After he bought his automobile he sold off the buggy to make room for his car in the barn, but he still kept a bunch of horses in a forty-acre pasture back of the barn just for old times' sake.

Doc found a loose connection on the starter and tightened it, and the engine started kicking the first punch. Five minutes later me and Doc was waving adios to the old cowman and his wife and they were on their way to the Coast. I didn't realize it at the time, but I was picking up information that was going to come in right handy later on.

I put Jessie hawse in the livery stable, with orders to feed her, ate my own dinner, and then went over to Abe Goldstein's to buy me a new hat. I picked me out a swell big gray Stetson that set me back a twenty-dollar gold piece.

Right next to Abe's place was a vacant lot with an old cellar hole, where the "Hurrah" Saloon stood before it burned down. I sent my old hat spinning out over that and put two holes through her with my six-gun by way of farewell, and then went over to the Square Deal Saloon to wet down the new Stet.

There was half a dozen fellows stationed at regular intervals along the bar to keep it from falling outward. They was all strangers to me, but you could see at a glance that this was their steady job.

There wasn't a regular cowboy in the place, it being a busy time on the range, but I never was overparticular about company; and, besides, I had a lot of money to spend and sure do hate to play Dick Smith.

So I got sociable with the gang and we had several snifters. They wasn't such a bad bunch at that, letting me do all the honors without no interference whatever. That is, all but one big bozo with a crooked right eye and a way of leering at you that gave you the feeling that he was giving you a horse laugh up his sleeve. I didn't like that hombre nohow, even though he was the only one in the bunch to buy back.

After we'd had six or seven drinks and was getting along toward "Sweet Adeline" and eternal friendship, this big guy suggests that we set into a little game of seven-card stud with deuces wild, just to kill a little time, which was all right with me.

II.

It was a little after noon when I entered the Square Deal Saloon, and a little after midnight when I came out. First off, I climbed down into the cellar hole and retrieved my old hat, and then strolled over to the depot, thinking up plans for my immediate future.

The station agent was just locking up for the night when I arrived.

"Why, hello, Rawhide," he greeted me, with surprise. "Why this night prowling? Got insomnia?"

"Worse than that," I told him glumly. "When does the next train leave east, Ed?"

"Three twenty this morning. Stops on signal only, and I won't be here. I can give you a newspaper, which you can light and flag her down. Want to buy a ticket?"

"Not unless the railroad is running a credit department," I answered. "I set into a little game of stud to-day over at the Square Deal, and some of your prominent citizens took me down the line for everything I own except my shirt, pants, and boots. What I'm hankering for is a freight car with an open side door. I'm fixing to drift north and hit for a job with the J-B outfit."

"Why, Rawhide Billings, I'm surprised at you!" cried Ed, aghast at this information. "Bucking that gang of crooks! Why, their system is absolutely unbeatable!"

"It seemed to work all right with me," I agreed. "But why this designating your fellow townsmen as crooks, Ed? And what's this system you mention? Do I gather from them two chance remarks that the cards were stacked against me?"

"You don't have to stack 'em in seven-card stud," the agent informed me sarcastically. "Them cards they used read the same, top and bottom, when you're acquainted with 'em. Them tinhorns read your hole cards as plain as if you'd laid 'em face up. You never had a chance. Did they hit you hard?"

"Oh, nothing to speak of," I told him cheerfully. "Only a little matter of three months' wages, a new hat, my Jessie hawse, saddle, bridle, spurs, and gun, ill will, and a cyclone."

"Cyclone?" queries Ed, looking puzzled.

"Yeah. They gets that later, if what you tell me is true."

"It is," he assured me. "If you want to go collecting I'll keep you company."

"That's right nice of you, Ed," I thanked him. "But I won't start no ruckus to-night. Besides, I ain't got no gun."

"I'll lend you mine," he offered.

"No, thanking you kindly, Ed. I ain't no squawker. We'll let them tinhorns ride for the present, and I'll get 'em in my own way when the proper time comes. Now, how about that freight?"

"Oh, well, if you feel that way about it," says Ed, very disgusted. "There's a freight through here at two ten. You'll have to flag that too, but it 'll be all right. I'll write you a note to the conductor, who is a friend of mine, telling him you are broke, and he'll see you through."

So Ed wrote the note, locked up and hit for the hay, while I settled down on an empty bread box against the east end of the depot to wait for the freight.

III.

It was a peachy night, with a half moon shining overhead and the white clouds flitting by. A brisk wind had sprung up out of the west, rustling the chaparral and slithering up my sleeves and pants legs and feeling right smart chilly.

I sat there quite a spell, building cigarettes and thinking about them tinhorns and cussing my damfoolishness.

Along about one thirty the train from the east pulled in. The conductor piled off with a lady passenger, pointed out the way to the hotel for her, and then signaled the engineer with his lantern, and the train pulled out. He didn't notice me setting there in the shadow.

I built me another smoke and continued my ruminations, which principally concerned a low-down hombre named Rawhide Billings, who'd been canned out of his job, got lit up on

cheap hootch, and trimmed out of his worldly possessions by a bunch of barroom bums, all in one short day. I was holding a pretty cheap opinion of myself just then, I'm telling you.

Then, of a sudden, I thought I detected a movement behind a pile of ties over across the tracks. I watched sharp and in a minute I saw it again. There was somebody over there, which wasn't natural this time of night. I started to hitch my gun around where it would be handy, only to remember that I did not own one any more.

In a minute this party steps out from behind the pile of ties and starts toward me. The moon comes out from behind a cloud just then, and by its light I see that it is a young lady. She was wearing a short skirt and a jacket and a tam-o'-shanter hat, and carried a suitcase.

Even by the moonlight I could see the yellow curls busting out from under her hat. She knew I was there; she probably saw the gleam of my cigarette.

"Hello," says she, stopping right in front of me.

"Good evening, ma'am," I answers, wondering what it was all about.

"Have you got a match?" she asks, peering at me through the gloom.

I handed her one, and she lit it, and by the light looked me over from boots to hat.

"Oh," she says in a relieved tone. "You're a cowboy, aren't you?"

"That's what I work at, ma'am," I answers. "What's the big idea of a young lady, like you, wandering around the right of way this time of night?"

"I got off that train that just went through," she informs me.

"I didn't see you get off."

"No. I bribed the porter to let me off on the other side, and then hid behind that pile of ties until I was sure the coast was clear," she elucidates.

"Why all the caution, ma'am?" I asks. "Somebody chasing you?"

The girl hesitated, sort of studying me over for a minute, and then suddenly she leaned forward, putting her mouth close to my ear and speaking fast and low.

"Yes, I am being chased," she informed me. "I am in great trouble. You look like a nice, honest young man, and I am going to ask you to help me. I will gladly pay you well for your trouble."

"Why, sure, ma'am, I'll be glad to do anything I can," I assured her. "That is, of course, if it's on the square. I wouldn't want to get mixed up in anything crooked."

"Oh, it's nothing like that," she told me earnestly. "It's an awfully long story, and I can tell you only part of it, because we've got to get away from here or we'll be caught.

"Now, listen. I'm Sadie McHugh, from St. Louis, and I'm an orphan and an heiress. I'll have twenty million dollars from my father's estate when I turn twenty-one.

"My guardian is a mean, nasty old lawyer named Bisbie. He is trying to take my fortune away from me by forcing me to marry his nephew, who is a half cooked, pimply-faced dumbbell. They had the wedding all set for last night, but I ran away yesterday morning. They are both hot on my trail, and if they catch me I will have to go back and marry that dirty little mutt. I just can't bear the thought! Please help me! Hide me some place!"

Now, wasn't that a swell little fairy tale to spring on me? Sounded like something out of a paper-covered book.

"Young lady," thinks I to myself, "that sounds like a plain, unvarnished falsehood, made up on the impulse of the moment. Still, you being a woman, I'm forced to give you the benefit of the doubt."

"Shucks, ma'am," says I aloud, "they can't force you to marry a man against your will in this day and age."

"Oh, but they can," she assured me

earnestly. "There are circumstances that you don't understand and which I haven't time to explain now. You must hide me somewhere quick. You see, my guardian and his nephew are liable to arrive here any minute, and if they catch me I won't be able to escape again, but will be made an unwilling and unhappy prisoner for the rest of my life. Oh, please, please believe me, and help me!"

She spoke with such evident sincerity that I was convinced on the spot that she was either a rotten liar or a peach of an actress, or both. She sounded honest enough, but still I hated like the devil to swallow that yarn.

"How do you know they're chasing you?" I asked her.

"I saw them at Caxton Junction. I arrived there last night about ten o'clock from the north, and was obliged to wait four hours for the westbound train on this line. When it came in I got right on and had just nicely seated myself, when the later train from the north, that connects with the westbound, pulled in right beside me, and I saw my guardian and his nephew get off.

"I made a quick run for the door and jumped off on the side opposite from where they were, and crouched down close to the car. My guardian wore striped trousers, and from under the car I could see those striped legs running up and down the platform, followed by another pair, evidently belonging to his nephew, hunting for poor little me.

"I saw them get aboard the train at one end and get off again at the other. Then the train pulled out, and I jumped on again, crouching low on the steps until we were well away from the depot before returning to my seat.

"All this took but a minute or two. I don't doubt but that they have made inquiries around the depot at Caxton Junction, and as I had to wait there for hours and bought a ticket and must have been observed by a number of people, I know they must have learned by now that I got away on that train. They've no doubt wired ahead to the conductor and learned that I got off here, and they are liable to arrive any minute. Won't you please hide me somewhere?"

I could see by now that the girl was plumb desperate. Caxton Junction was the first station east of us and twelve miles away, and it would not take long to cover that distance. Maybe this was a fairy tale she was telling me, and maybe it was the truth. I could not prove it one way or the other just then. There seemed to be a reasonable doubt either way. It's never been said that Rawhide Billings deserted a lady in actual distress, and, acting on instinct, I decided to help her.

"All right, ma'am, I'll do what I can," I told her. "I'm hanged if I know where I'm going to hide you. Personally I ain't got no more home than a jack rabbit."

"Oh, you must think of some place!" she cried, wringing her hands and starting to squall. "I—I—I'd rather wed a nice, big, handsome cowboy, like you, and live out here in the great open spaces, than go back to St. Louis."

"You mean, you'd marry me?" I asks, astonished.

"Oh, I'd just love to!" she gasped eagerly. "I know I could be happy with a big, honest man like you. We'd buy the biggest ranch in the whole West and build a castle on it, and have lots and lots of cows and horses and everything! Will—will you do it?"

Wow! That was a mouthful, wasn't it? And she was not a bad looking dame, at that, with her golden locks and slim ankles and boyish figure. What couldn't a poor rannie like me do with twenty million bones? I fair turned dizzy thinking about it. Biggest ranch in the whole Southwest, stocked with imported English shorthorns! Maybe this was a fairy tale—it was

getting more like one every minute. It might be worth taking a shot at anyhow.

"Think! Think!" Sadie implored, peeping out from behind her handkerchief between sobs. "You must think of some place quick or I—I—I'm l-l-lost!"

Well, putting it up to a man that way, what else could I do but think? There were plenty of ranches, scattered far and between, where I could take her; but her presence would be known all over the territory next day. News travels fast in the West. Then, of a sudden, I though of Ma Beam!

IV.

Ma was one of them regular old-time Western he-women, with a mind of her own and a perfect willingness to express it. She lived alone on the old Bent-Arrow ranch, eighteen miles south of Sudden City and not far from the Mexican border. Ever since her husband, old Dad Beam, died a couple of years back, and she had been compelled to sell off the stock and slap a mortgage on the place to pay off his debts; she had been hanging on there, hoping something would break to put her on her feet again.

Being she was hard up and alone, I figured Ma wouldn't be averse to taking on a paying boarder, and as there wasn't any help there, and the old lady tight-mouthed as they make them, and the ranch isolated, it wasn't likely any one would learn about Sadie being there for quite a spell.

Besides that, once Ma got the how of the situation, and provided she was in sympathy with it, this guardian and his nephew would have one merry hell of a time getting Sadie away from Ma. She come from a breed of old-timers that used to scalp at least one Injun every morning before breakfast. Next thing was how I was going to get Sadie out there.

This was a poser. I'd lost Jessie hawse in that stud game, and she wasn't available. I slid down to the west end of the depot and took a slant over at the Square Deal. The place was dark and the hitching rail empty. No chance there. Then I thought of Asa Benton's hawses out in his pasture.

"Can you set a saddle?" I asked, coming back to the girl.

"Goodness, no!" she answered. "I was never on a hawse in my life!"

Well, that put a crimp in that idea, and I did some more thinking. Then I remembered the old buckboard back of Doc Lucas's blacksmith shop and had a happy inspiration.

"You set down on this box and wait until I come back," I instructed the girl. "I'm going after a rig."

"All right," she answers. "But, hurry. We haven't any time to waste."

I hustled over to Asa's barn. The door was padlocked, but I pried out a staple with an old tire iron I found and was inside in a jiffy. There was some harness on the pegs, and Asa's old saddle was hanging by one stirrup with the riata still tied to it. I took this and a couple of halters, hustled out to the pasture and roped me a couple of hawses, led them to the barn and threw the harness on them. Five minutes later I had them hooked up to the buckboard and tied back of the blacksmith shop, and was on my way to get the girl.

I'd just stepped into the street when here come an automobile from the east. The headlights hit me square before I could duck out of sight, and I kept right on going, hoping they would pass me by.

No such luck. "Honk, honk," says the horn, and they pulled up alongside. I got a jolt right off the bat. Old Lafe Elwood was at the wheel and he was sheriff of Caxton Junction. There's a couple of bozos with hard-boiled hats in the back seat. I couldn't see them plain, but had a hunch who they was right off.

"Hello, Rawhide," says Lafe, looking surprised. "What you gallivantin' 'round this time o' night for?"

"Walking 'round to keep warm," I told him. "I'm fixing to hit east on the two ten freight."

"Sure you're lying?" he asks, looking me over suspicious.

I showed him the note Ed had written to the conductor, which seemed to convince him.

"Was you down to the depot when number forty-seven went through?" he asks.

"Why, yes, I was down there," I told him.

"See anybody get off?"

"Yep. A lady got off and went over to the hotel," I answers truthfully enough.

That seemed to interest them mightily. The bozos in the rear seat leaned forward.

"Was she a blonde, medium height, slim, and wearing a tam-o'-shanter hat?" one of them asks.

"That describes her perfectly, pilgrim," I lied.

"That's the party we're looking for!" cried Lafe. "Much obliged, Rawhide; adios," and he made a quick run to the hotel, half a block ahead, where they all piled out and rushed inside. I knew the night man would be setting up until after the three twenty passenger went through and they'd get quick action. I done some more fast thinking.

Something had to be done darn quick, or that little dame was going to get caught. I had a good team of hawses hooked onto the buckboard, but they'd never outrun Lafe's car. There was just one thing to do, and hustling down to the hotel, I raised the hood of the car and yanked out the wiring, cutting it off with my knife and throwing it into the street.

Through the hotel window I could see the three men arguing with the night clerk. Evidently the latter was reluctant to wake up his guest. Well, the longer they chewed the rag the better for me, and I made a quick run to the depot, hustled Sadie across the back lot to the blacksmith shop, and in half a minute we were in the buckboard and on our way.

Judging from the noise, that vehicle hadn't been greased since the battle of the Alamo. Every joint was loose and rattling, and of all the squawking and screeching and caterwauling you ever heard, that was the limit.

The hawses was skittish and r'aring to go, and I was doing my little damndest trying to hold them down and not make so cussed much racket, and the worst of it was we had to drive right past the hotel in order to get on our road.

I figured they'd be bound to hear us, and they did. Just as we were passing the building, old Lafe stuck his head out the door, and right then the moon had to come out from behind a cloud and expose us plain to the naked eye. The sheriff let a yell out of him that must 'a' fetched the others to the door on the jump, and then I laid the line ends onto those cayuses and away we went hell bent for election!

I heard Lafe yell again, and then guns started popping, and the bullets whanged by plenty close. I took one look back, and saw all three men piling into the car, and just naturally couldn't help snickering when I thought what Lafe was going to say about that wiring.

I knew the delay wouldn't be for long. Lafe would raise the whole town in jig time, and rustle up another car or some saddle ponies and be after us on the jump. Chances were that we'd have plenty company when they caught up with us, if they did. I figured we had a good start and a tough pair of hawses, and had ought to outdistance them if the darn wagon held out.

And there was the rub! The old boat was rattling and cracking like it was due to blow up any second. I was

expecting it every jump, but this wasn't no time to consider possibilities any which way, and I laid on the line ends regardless, and kept the team thumping like a pair of jack rabbits for four solid miles, when we came to the turn-off leading to Ma Beam's ranch. I don't reckon there was a more surprised man in the State than I was when I realized we'd come this far without a breakdown.

I pulled up and listened for sounds of pursuit, and there wasn't a thing to be heard except the wind rustling the chaparral and a ground owl hooting away off somewhere.

V.

"Do you think they'll chase us?" asked Sadie, opening up for the first time.

"I know damn well they will," I told her, and then went on to explain about meeting the sheriff and the other two bozos back in Sudden City. "I put their car out of commission," I concluded, "but that ain't going to prevent them from paying us a little call if we don't keep going."

We took the turn-off, and drove on at an easy trot. I kept looking back, watching for auto lights and listening for the thud of hoofs, but everything seemed serene.

Sadie was nice enough to keep her mouth shut, and I wasn't talking none, being occupied with my own thoughts. I'd got myself into a hell of a pickle, I had! I wasn't worrying much about squaring myself with Doc Lucas and Asa Benton. They were good scouts, and would see my damfoolishness in the right light once I explained it to them, but telling the sheriff how come I yanked the wiring out of his car was going to be a different matter. Lafe was hard-boiled and plumb irritable. I'd draw at least six months if he had his way.

We covered five more miles without anything happening, and I was beginning to congratulate myself that we was going to make the ranch without a mishap, when all of a sudden the tire on the right front wheel rattled off and the whole wheel promptly collapsed!

Well! Now we were up against it! Halfway to Ma Beam's and stuck as solid as a monkey with its tail froze in the ice!

I considered throwing the harness off one of the hawses and riding the rest of the way, but that was going to be a tough proposition. I'd have to put Sadie up behind me, which would be all right for slow traveling, but in case we had to light out, which was darn likely any minute, and me bareback and no spurs and a tenderfoot girl clawing at my back, fat chance we'd have! We'd get piled the first ten jumps!

I climbed down and laid my ear to the ground, Injun fashion, and listened. Just as I feared, I could hear the steady thud-thud of hoofs away off somewhere, faint but sure. They were coming, all right! We didn't have no time to monkey around!

"I wish I had a gun," says I, getting up from the ground.

And Sadie hands me a big Colt automatic! I near keeled over with surprise!

"Where'd you get this?" I asked her.

"Out of my suitcase," she informed me. "I brought it along to shoot my guardian and his nephew, in case I had to."

"Gosh!" thinks I. "This dame's plumb desperate, all right! That nephew wouldn't be so damn anxious to get married if he knowed what she was fixing to pet him with!"

I looked the gat over. I'm right at home with a .45 Colt, but these newfangled contraptions always did get my goat. They ain't got no hammer to thumb nor nothing.

"How do you cock this thing?" I asks Sadie.

She set it for me. "Now all you have to do is pull the trigger," she tells me, and I lays the gun on the buckboard seat for future reference and took a look around.

We'd broke down right on the edge of a clearing in the chaparral that covered several acres. Over to the right, about one hundred yards from the road, I noticed a dark streak, and walked over to investigate. It was a narrow barranca, running across the clearing parallel with the road, and was about five feet deep. Right off I gets a bang-up idea! I'd fool that posse and leave them foot loose, by golly!

I hustled back to the buckboard and took another listen on the ground. The hoof thuds were louder, and coming fast, and I realized that I'd have to hustle. Picking up the girl and her suitcase, I carried them back into the chaparral to where some big rocks jutted out of the ground and shoved her in among them. I carried her so as to show but one set of tracks.

"Now you stay right here," I instructed her. "There'll probably be a lot of shooting, but you keep your head down and don't get scared. If my plan works out, and I believe it will, they won't find you."

"All right, big boy, I'll do just as you say," she answered, smiling.

I grabs the gun and hustled for the barranca, and hadn't any more than dropped into it when here come the posse. I counted at least a dozen riders. They dashed up to the buckboard and piled off to investigate, and the time arrived for me to go into action.

Drawing a bead just over their heads, I let go all eight shots as fast as I could pull the trigger, shooting low so they'd be sure and hear the whine of the bullets. That attracted their attention right off, as I'd figured it would, and they went into action on the instant. I had to duck right sudden to dodge the hail of bullets that came my way.

But I didn't linger there none. Bending low, I made a quick run up the barranca for fifty yards to the edge of the chaparral. Here I stopped and cautiously raised my head high enough to see that the attention of the whole bunch was focused on the spot where they had seen the flash of my gun, and I could hear old Lafe yelling at me to come out and surrender. I knowed they'd be paying particular attention to that spot for a few minutes.

Snaking out of the barranca and into the chaparral, I started on a quick run around to the buckboard, keeping well in the shadow of the brush. The wind had brisked up, and that drowned any noise I might have made.

Within two minutes from the time I had fired the shots I was on my hands and knees at the edge of the chaparral right back of the buckboard and was piping off the lay. Just as I had figured, the posse was sneaking forward toward the barranca, spread out fan-shape so as to get me at either end in case I should make a break, and Lafe was yelling every ten seconds for me to come out and give up. One man was staying with the ponies, and my heart gave one happy jump when I saw who he was.

It was that big tinhorn, with the crooked eye and dirty leer, who had skinned me out of my hat and gun and most of my wad in that crooked stud game, and I'm near to screech with joy when I see Jessie hawse among the cayuses he's holding.

"Now, if I can just get my two hands onto your windpipe before you get a chance to yell," I prayed as I stood up. The hawses shielded me from the view of the posse in case any of them took a notion to look that way, which wasn't likely, and the big guy had his back toward me watching the other boys.

And right there I makes a fool break, which, after all, couldn't have been helped. As I stepped out of the chaparral, Jessie hawse, catching the movement, looked my way, and recog-

nizing me, pricked up her ears and nickered.

Quick as a flash the big man whirled around, yanking out his gun as he came, and discovered me not six feet behind him. I expected he'd let out a yell that would bring the others back on the jump, but, instead, he grinned and placed his finger on his lips, keeping me covered with the gun all the time.

"Where's yore partner?" he whispered, stepping up close. I was too astonished to answer him. Just stood open-mouthed and stared. I'd expected him to jump all over me.

"Come on, come on," he whispered again, casting an anxious glance back at the posse. "Where's yore partner? Quick, now! I'll help you get away!"

For all of three seconds I couldn't say a word. Why this big lobo should want to help us get away was beyond me just then, but he evidently meant it, and I didn't have much choice but accept the proposition.

My glance shifted back to the posse. They had reached the barranca by now, and finding it empty, were piling down into it. They'd find my tracks in the sandy bottom and trail me around to the buckboard in jig time. There wasn't a second to lose.

"All right," I whispered. "I'll get the girl."

I hustled back to the rocks where I'd hid her and yanked Sadie out from among them. She'd stuck right there like a good little girl. We were back again in a jiffy.

The big fellow was hustling from one hawse to the other, yanking off the bridles of all but the ones we were to use. He hung 'em on the horn of his saddle and signaled O. K.

"This lady can't ride," I told him.

"You carry her," he instructed. "I'll lead a hawse for her. We'll make a quick run for a couple of miles, and then we can walk. Anybody can ride a walking hawse."

"Right-o! Let's go!" I whispered back, swinging into the saddle and pulling Sadie up in front of me, suitcase and all.

The big guy raises his gun, lets go three quick shots into the air, screeching like a Piute the while, and this stampeded the hawses, of course, and they scattered in every which direction. Then away we went hell bent for Mexico!

VI.

That bunch of bum trailers was as surprised as I figured they'd be. They come boiling out of the barranca like ants when they heard the shots and yelling. It was a good five seconds before they recovered from their surprise enough to realize what was coming off, and by then we'd got a good start. They opened up shooting just the same, and for the next hundred yards we traveled the bullets whined around us like a whole family of white head hornets. Then we went around a bend of the road and the shooting stopped.

I wasn't worried about our being followed for a spell. We'd sure throwed a scare into them cayuses, and they'd gone high-tailing off in every direction. It was going to take time to catch them, and even then they wouldn't have any bridles. They could make some hackamores out of their lassos, but all that was going to take time.

Jessie hawse was just as glad to see me as I was her, and fair flew over the road, with the big bozo keeping close beside us, leading the extra hawse. Sadie had a strangle hold around my neck with one arm, and was hanging onto her suitcase with the other, and was having a terrible time of it. Well, I never did know any one who could ride the horn on a running hawse with any degree of grace or comfort. After a couple of swift miles we pulled up. I transferred the girl to the empty saddle, taking possession of the suitcase.

"I don't know why you done all this, but it was right nice of you," I addressed the big fellow.

"I do," he told me shortly. "Keep riding, hombre," and he came in between us, covering me with the gun.

"But we don't want to go back to Sudden City," I expostulated, not liking his tone a little bit and plumb bewildered over his attitude. "You can leave us right here and go on into town and we'll circle back around that posse and head south—"

"You won't do no such thing," he growled angrily. "I know what yore going to do. We'll head into Caxton Junction—oughter make it by sunup—and then we catch the first train north. Now, get going."

"But what for?" I cried, all up in the air over this program.

"You know damn well what for!" he snapped. "Now quit arguing and get going, or I'll let a streak of daylight through you and leave you here for the buzzards!"

And I could tell by the gleam in his eye that he meant it, too. I shot a glance over his shoulder at Sadie. She was looking white and scared, but saying nothing. It was plain that she didn't like the situation any better than I did.

"Oh, all right, if you feel that way about it," I told him, starting ahead. "But this is all Choctaw to me. I supposed you was helping us make a getaway, but instead you are running us right into more trouble. I don't savvy your play nohow, mister."

"Oh, yes you do," he grinned nastily. He was keeping close beside me, leading Sadie's cayuse by the reins and not paying any attention to the girl. It was me he was watching. "I'm making the same play you was figuring on, only I'm beating you to it—"

Them were the last words I heard that particular hombre utter for the moment. Out the corner of my eye I saw Sadie's arm go up and then down, and the big fellow slumped in his saddle and slipped to the ground like a sack of oats.

I stared down at him for a second, clean kerflummaxed, and then looked across his hawse at Sadie. She was still pretty white, but smiling.

"I got him," she remarked, and held up her right hand. In it was a lead-loaded leather blackjack! Darned if she hadn't crowned the sucker!

"You seem to be prepared for almost any emergency," I told her. "Do you happen to have any more promiscuous weapons concealed around your small person?"

"No, I guess this is the last one," she laughed. "When I left home I tried to go prepared for any emergency that might come up. I'd picked up this blackjack in a pawnshop a long time ago and had it hanging on the wall of my room for a curiosity, and I slipped it into my stocking just before I left."

"It was a bright idea," I told her. "It came in right smart handy."

I slid out of the saddle and looked the big fellow over. He wasn't bad hurt, just knocked out for the time and would be all right again in a few minutes, I figured. Then I done a little quick collecting.

The first thing was my new hat, which he'd been wearing. Then I relieved him of my spurs, and then I unbuckled my belt off him and put that on, slipping my gun into the holster, after which I frisked a big, healthy-looking roll of bills out of his pants pocket. I didn't know whether all of it belonged to me, and I wasn't taking the time to count it just then. I can't begin to tell you how much better I felt after that.

I had just nicely finished this job when the big guy opened his eyes.

"What happened?" he asked, nursing a beautiful bump on the back of his head.

"You got good and properly beaned," I informed him. "Get up."

He climbed onto his hind legs, pretty

wobbly and sick and looked into the muzzle of the gun I presented to him.

"Now, you listen, son," I told him. "I don't know whether I ought to be grateful to you for what you did or not. Anyhow, I was figuring on pulling the same stunt myself and about all you did was to make it easier.

"Just the same, to be on the safe side, I'll say much obliged to you, and incidentally advise you that I have repossessed myself of a few of my belongings you collected off me yesterday with a deck of marked cards and the kind assistance of a few more coyotes that I'll interview later, when I have more time. Now, you fork that cayuse and breeze out of here, pronto, and don't talk back, either!"

"You win, Rawhide," answered the other, trying to grin and making a bum job of it. "I'm drifting per orders. Mebbe we'll meet up again some day, friend. I'm hoping."

"And now, young lady," says I, after he'd rode away, "we'll just vamose out of here before that posse catches up with us and starts more trouble. I ain't holding up anything against you, seeing I stepped into this ruckus with my eyes open, but if you were to marry me to-morrow and hand over the whole of those twenty million bucks with full authority to spend, lend, and otherwise mishandle them, I don't know as it would be just compensation for the misery I've been going through for the past few hours."

"And I'm going to do just that, honey!" she cried, smiling up at me with sparkling eyes. "I think you're just the most handsome and wonderful and brave man I ever met! You can have my bank roll and me to do as you please with just as quick as any preacher you get makes us one!"

Oh, sugar! What do you know about a girl like her talking to a waddie like me thataway? It got me all fussed up and blushing and flying wild generally.

"Let's get going," was all I could answer.

VII.

Day was just breaking and everything was quiet when we arrived at Ma Beam's ranch house. I eased Sadie off her hawse and she crumpled down like a wet blanket. That ride had sure took the tuck out of her.

"Now, you set right there while I talk to Ma," I instructed her. "The old lady's a little jumpy on occasions, and I want her to know the how of this affair before springing you on her."

"Who's that?" yelled Ma, when I slammed the front door.

"It's me—Rawhide Billings," I answered.

"Just wait till I get my pants on," she hollers back.

A light flickers through the window, the door swings open and there stands Ma, in her old patched overhauls and shirt, barefoot, her white hair loose and straggling over her eyes. She's holding a ten-gauge scattergun.

"Well, well! So it is!" she exclaimed. "Come in, Rawhide. What you done now?"

I shut the door and told her all the circumstances as fast as I could. "Now what Sadie wants is for you to hide her until her guardian and his son quit hunting her," I concluded.

Ma listened, open-mouthed, until I had finished, and then busts out laughing.

"Well, for Pete's sake, Rawhide!" she chortled. "You sure have had one hell of a time now, ain't you? And all over a gal you never saw before and probably never will again! What with rustling them hawses and the buckboard, defying the law, shooting up sheriff's posses, braining a tinhorn and robbing him, and a few other atrocities, it would seem to me that any judge, willing to do the right thing, would give you a life sentence and ten days extra for good behavior!"

"That little girl's worth the trou-

ble," I assured her. "And as for never seeing her again—don't fool yourself on that score. I'm taking a little pasear down into old Mexico until this ruckus blows over and Lafe gets calmed down, and then I'm coming back and marry that little dame and she and me will buy the biggest ranch in the State, stock it with imported English shorthorns, and—"

"Rave on, rave on!" interrupted Ma derisively. "Where is the heiress, Rawhide?"

"Right outside," I told her. "I just wanted to make sure that you would look after her until I got back."

"Well—as to that, I can't promise you definite," Ma told me solemnly. "The real cold facts is, Rawhide, the sheriff's like to be out here and foreclose on this ranch any day. It's got a thousand-dollar plaster on it and it's overdue, and I don't know where I'm going to raise a thousand bones, unless I take this gun and get out on the main highway and stick up a bootlegger. Still, your gal friend can stay here as long as I do."

"That's fair enough," I told her, and went to the door and called Sadie. She came staggering in like a sage hen out of a cloudburst, all raggled out and limp and discouraged. Ma took one look at her and gasped.

"Well, for Pete's sake!" she ejaculated, grabbing the girl by the wrist and dragging her over to the light. Ma looked intently into her face for a long minute, and Sadie returned the stare bravely. The old lady's mouth was working and her eyes snapping excitedly.

"Your hat's on crooked, deary," she said suddenly, reaching up and straightening the headgear and patting the golden locks back into place.

"Well, for Pete's sake!" she cried again, glancing at me curiously. She had laid the scattergun on the table while I was talking, and now she picked it up and dropped it in the crook of her arm. Ma seemed to be all in a flutter over something that I couldn't get. She dug the makings out of her pants pocket and built herself a smoke, keeping a wary eye on the girl all the while. It was darn curious, I thought.

And it was making Sadie uneasy, too. She sidled over beside me, watching Ma closely. "I'm going with you, Rawhide," she whispered. "I don't want to stay here."

"You ain't going to do no such thing!" barked Ma, who had evidently overheard the remark. "A nice, pretty young lady, like you, ain't got no business traipsing round Mexico with an escaped outlaw, who's like to be caught and hung any minute! Besides, it wouldn't look right! You two ain't married yet! No, ma'am, you're going to stay right here at home where mother can look after you!"

The old lady strode to the middle of the room, stooped down, and yanked up the trapdoor to the root cellar. "You git down there!" she ordered, turning back to Sadie.

"I won't!" returned the girl, real defiant.

"Oh, yes you will!" Ma came back, cocking both barrels of the scattergun and jabbing the muzzle into the girl's ribs. "Lafe Elwood and his posse are like to blow in here any minute, and I ain't purposing that they find you here! Git along down there, now, and don't start any argying! I mean business!" and she gave the girl another jab with the gun.

"Aw, now, Ma—" I began in expostulation, but the old lady cut me off short.

"You shut up, Rawhide!" she snapped, giving me a glare. "I know what I'm doing! You tell your gal friend to git down into that cellar before I blow her in two!"

Well, anybody that knows her will tell you that Ma ain't to be trifled with when she's got her dander up, and she sure had it up right then. That scattergun was all ready to explode on very slight provocation.

"I guess mebbe you'd better do as she says," I advised Sadie, who was again looking pretty white and desperate. "I guess it 'll be all right. Ma's promised me that she would look after you."

"You're damn right I will," interjected Ma grimly. "Now, young lady, you git down in that cellar before that posse comes! I'm through argying! I won't tell you again."

And very much against her will Sadie went. She didn't have any choice in the matter, and it was just as plain to her as it was to me that Ma wouldn't stand for any monkey work. The old lady slammed down the trap and turned to me.

"Now you git going for Mexico, Rawhide," she ordered. "Lafe Elwood must be pretty wild over the way you've handled him, and he's going to trail you here just sure as hell. You stick around down there for a spell and I'll do what I can to square things with the sheriff for you — if such a thing's possible. When you come back, come here and see me first. I'll have something to say to you that may interest you right smart. Now beat it! Vamose!"

Ma's conduct was mighty queer and mystifying. I couldn't get the hang of it, nohow. Still, I had a lot of faith in Ma. She gets rough once in awhile, but she's sensible. I didn't understand her any more than I do any other woman—which is, not at all. I knew there wasn't any use trying to make her explain herself. It would all come straight in the end, I told myself, and beat it for Mexico.

VIII.

I HAD a nice little vacation down in the land of the cacti. When I thumbed over the bills I had took off that tinhorn I found I hadn't done so bad after all in that stud game. Matter of fact, I had made good money, and I doubled the pile when I crossed the border and changed my roll into Mexican currency.

Jessie hawse and I had a swell time bumming around from one town to the other and hobnobing with the greasers. They ain't such bad folks when you get acquainted with them. We drifted back to the old Bent Arrow ranch two months later with money still in my pocket.

I got a jolt the minute I sighted the ranch house. It was all dolled up and fresh painted, white with green trimmings. There was a big front porch on the front end of it, and a new picket fence around the front yard. The bunk house and barns were all fresh painted, too, and everything around the place picked up and spick and span.

"Shucks!" thinks I when I see all this. "Ma's been foreclosed on, and the new owners have cleaned up the old dump!" I started to ride right by, thinking there was no use stopping there.

"Hi, there, Rawhide, where're you going?" yells a familiar voice, and I looked back to see Ma Beam waving at me from the front porch and all dolled up in new clothes. "Come back here," she yelled, and right off I made another guess on the how-come of all the improvements.

"I was beginning to think that you never was coming back," she scolded as I came onto the porch and shook hands with her. "Been looking for you for weeks!"

"Why, Ma, it looks like you was starting life all over again!" I exclaimed.

"I sure am," she averred.

"Mortgage lifted?" I asked, feeling more convinced than ever that I had guessed right that last time.

"Yep, and everything all set to go. I was just waiting for you."

"Did Sadie do this?" I queried, satisfied now that I was right.

"You're damn right she did!" grinned Ma, giving me a queer look.

"Now ain't that nice," says I, real

pleased. "I knowed Sadie was a good scout, and would do the right thing by you! Where is she?" I asked real eager.

"She's gone, Rawhide," Ma tells me solemnly.

"Gone!" I cried, my heart taking a drop. "Not for good, Ma?"

"I'm afraid so, Rawhide. She's in State Prison."

"Huh!" That knocked the wind plumb out of me. I couldn't say a word.

"Come inside and I'll show you all about it," says Ma, and I followed her, too dumfounded to speak. The old lady took some newspapers off the shelf and turned to me.

"When things started going wrong here at the ranch, and I had to give up most of the comforts of life, I made up my mind that there was one luxury I wouldn't let go, and that was my Chicago daily newspaper. I been subscribing by the year for that paper ever since the rural free delivery started in this section. It turned out to be a darn good investment in the long run, Rawhide. Just you take a slant at them pictures."

She handed me one of the papers. Right on the front page was the pictures of a young man and a lady side by side. I was that surprised I near keeled over.

"Recognize 'em?" asked Ma, grinning.

"Why — why — this here one's Sadie," I answered, staring at the page. "And this guy next to her—he looks like he might be her twin brother."

"Well, it ain't," chortled Ma. "It's her."

"Her!" I gasped, plumb bewildered.

"Yep," answered Ma, complacently. "She's him and he's her. Both the same party."

"But—but—" I stammered, getting wilder all the time.

"Why don't you read what it says?" asks Ma, evidently getting a lot of fun out of it.

Then I took a slant at the top of the page, and there in big print, read the following:

McLEAY, NOTORIOUS BANK BANDIT, IN TOILS!

The "Golden-Haired Bandit," Who Has Terrorized Local Banks for the Past Three Weeks, Captured Single-Handed by Aged Widow, Owner of Far-West Cattle Ranch!

I skimmed through the rest of the story in a hurry, and it was sure highly enlightening. One paragraph in particular held my attention:

> Before entering on his career of crime a few weeks ago, McLeay was well known on the vaudeville stage as an actor of exceptional ability, and was rated as one of the cleverest female impersonators in the country.

"Why, Sadie was a man!" says I, as the truth began to dawn on my befuddled brain.

"Correct, Rawhide. Go to the head," chuckled Ma, who was getting a whale of a kick out of all this. "Why, you big boob, I saw it the minute you brought her in here! He had his yellow wig on crooked, and his real hair showed plain on one side! That's why I straightened his hat for him; so you wouldn't notice."

"But how'd you happen to know so much about it?" I asked.

"Why, the papers was full of it for weeks. I'd seen his picture a dozen times before you brought him here, both as man and as girl. Having been an actor it wasn't hard for the paper to dig up old photographs of him.

"He had a swell time for awhile, sticking up branch banks around Chicago, disguised as Sadie; but one day he tackled a bank at the time when an actor was making a deposit there, and this party recognized him and spilled the beans. He had to vamose in a hurry.

"There was a couple of detectives

hot on his trail, and they were close to nailing him at Caxton Junction. Came in just one train behind him. Sadie told us he saw them from the window of the westbound train while they were running around the depot trying to find him. They didn't know the ropes, and the train pulled out on them. Sadie knew they'd wire ahead, so he dropped off the train at Sudden City, hid behind that pile of ties, and changed his clothes. You know the rest."

"But if you recognized him the night I brought him here, why didn't you show him up right then and there? What 'd you want to send me off to Mexico for?" I asked, indignant.

"Huh!" snorted Ma with a great show of scorn. "Did you think I was going to let you pull down half of that reward and then go and lose it in a crooked stud poker game? Not on your tintype, Rawhide!"

"Reward?" says I, surprised again. "What reward?"

"Oh, just a little matter of five thousand dollars that the banks put up for his capture. I got it, Rawhide," she tells me.

"Yep. Lafe Elwood and them two Chicago detectives had a notion that the reward ought to be split four ways, each of us taking a share, but I exploded that idea damn sudden. I had the prisoner holed up in my root cellar, and I just naturally insisted that I get the whole reward before I'd give him up. I just *had* to have it."

"Well, I'll be darned!" says I, grinning all over. That sure *was* good news.

"And, say!" I cried, getting a sudden hunch. "What's been bothering me all along was why that big bozo tried to kidnap me and Sadie that night. Must be he knowed about that five thousand reward, and was trying to cop it off for himself!"

"Sure he was," Ma told me. "What Lafe Elwood didn't do to that hombre ain't worth telling. He's still serving time in the county jail, and he'll be there a sweet, long time if the sheriff has his way about it. Lafe was sure sore over that trick.

"And now, listen, son," Ma went on. "The old Bent Arrow ranch is going into action again. I'm the boss, and you're elected foreman at top wages. That's why I've been waiting for you. I happen to know that you are one of the best little buyers that ever sized up a beef critter.

"Now, I got three thousand dollars laid aside out of that reward money, and to-morrow you take it and start out restocking this ranch. I don't reckon it 'll be with imported English shorthorns, but I want a good, hardy breed. I'm leaving that part to you. Are you on?"

"Why—sure," says I, kind of hesitating. "I'll be right pleased to take the job, Ma, if I don't have to go to jail. I gather from your remarks that Lafe is right peeved."

"You won't have to go to jail," Ma assured me. "I squared you with Lafe and the other boys, and they'll be all right about it, but you're going to get one awful laugh from the gang next time you hit Sudden Junction."

THE END

FIGHT FANS

and our readers generally will be deeply interested in two very unusual stories of championship bouts we are soon to give them. They are both Complete Novelettes, and each handles the subject not only expertly, but from a wholly new angle, up to the latest clanging of the gong. Watch for future announcements as to release dates.

Rope Neckties

By JOHN WILSTACH

Author of "Under Cover Charges," "The Devil's Flower," "Forged Faces," etc.

He was haunted by a memory that called for revenge, though he seemed just a carefree roamer of the Western cattle ranges

WHAT HAS OCCURRED IN PART I

HARRY FLINT, who is telling this story, is working as a wandering cowboy in order to find the murderers of his father and brother, who stole all their cattle and horses. He pals up with a wild gunman named Shorty, who does him the favor of killing Slim Quarters, who was about to shoot Harry in an unfair manner. As Slim was a friend of Sheriff Sleepy Kennedy, a posse follows them from town; so they fortify themselves in a rocky shelter known to holdup men. There Harry fights a duel with Sheriff Sleepy, which leaves that official alive, but will get him laughed out of town. Then the two partners eat breakfast, and Harry tells Shorty of his quest for vengeance on the murdering rustlers.

CHAPTER IX.

HEADING NORTH.

"AS to this sheriff person," Shorty sums up, "you runs a blazer on him and gains your p'int. That is some sensible. If you'd wiped him out complete, the posse might have jumped us. You know how it is—something good is always said about the dead. A slain skunk becomes a martyr in mem'ry. He's lost all his power, alive, and shown up as a yeller belly."

"That was just my ideer," I tells him, "though the temptation was great to let him have a dose of lead in his vitals. My thumb itched on the hammer after that first shot."

We were packing our stuff readying for departure. I filled a couple of canteens and we said good-by to that lucky roost.

Wisely we led by the reins instead of trying to ride our hosses down that tortuous path. Reaching the stagecoach trail, we mounts and heads them north.

It was kind of nice to canter along without that hunted feeling.

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for April 21

A few miles of rough going, and we comes out on more level ground; the rocky hills still bear away to the west, but north and east is soft rolling meadow country. This county was played out for my purpose, and I aimed to keep away from the ranches on this range.

During the county round-up I had done my darnedest, circ'lating around like a detective with the hives, and speaking to this one and that as a parrot with one line to repeat.

I had learned absolutely nothing. My total intake was zero.

I know Gorge City is my finish point, and it appears I had to get nearer there before I could flash any results.

Foolish like, in the heat of youthful rage, when I puts up that thirty-five hundred dollars it was, practical speaking, all the gold I had. I posted and sent the notice over four States, and left the money on deposit at the Jacksontown National Bank, never realizing until it was too late that cash would be mighty helpful in moving about as an am'teur range detective.

Just young and unthinking. You can't expect a colt to have the wisdom of a full-grown horse.

I has wasted two months working for Roswell; he was full handed when I drifted in, and only by giving him a hint of looking for rustlers had I made him take me on as a top hand.

Course, as you know, Slim Quarters had recognized me from the Panhandle country, though he never said a word to show it. He had a rep as a bad actor there, I disliked him personal, and was afraid he might be in touch with the leaders I was after.

By a fluke Shorty had listed him among the forever missing; if not, it would have been me. I was just playing in luck, as in my encounter with Sleepy Kennedy; counting him out like a broken chip in a poker game.

We cantered on for an hour or so, saying nothing. My hoss Blackie was fresh and frisky, after a good rest in the corral at Roswell's, and now could go on indefinite, with attention to water, and find his own feed.

It is all the way a hoss is brung up; I hears in the effete East the equines has special food and blankets and rub-downs every morning and night, and stalls in the stable with their names over 'em.

If Blackie got that kind of treatment he'd wonder the reason why, and whether he might be asked to kill some one the following morning.

The stagecoach trail is not, you understand, like a wagon road. There is just an impression, now and agin, where a wheel has pressed down in rainy weather, dried, and left a mark, nothing to speak of for a space, and then you can pick up the lead once more.

Not hard for a plainsman, naturally, and as to an Injun, it would be A B C to him. An Apache or Cheyenne could foller marks like that in the dark. Only course they don't.

Injuns never trail or fight at night, which is fortunate for settlers and covered wagons on the move; they is afeared of the bad spirits abroad with the dark.

And a good thing, too, it proved, a little later in our pers'nal travels.

Mebbe this long silence that goes along with us becomes monotonous to Shorty.

"Every time I opens my mind I exposes an empty space, I know," he says, "and I bow to you as the leader of this yere expedition. But may I ask questions?"

I grinned. Shorty was what they calls odd. A bad man to trifle with, and gun restless if provoked, he is extreme bashful with a bunkie. You wouldn't think two such opposite natures could live in the same man, but you has my word for it.

"Shoot, kid," I said. "I'm wide open. There ain't no secrets between us that can't be pried apart."

"Lissen, Harry, I've been wonderin'

why we buys these Sharp rifles and lots of cartridges to go with 'em."

"It took you a long time to get to it, partner. I gives you one guess," I replies, smiling at him.

"I already took a dozen without being asked. If you was going to hold up a stage, or anything, you'd have bought ordinary shotguns and had the ends sawed short."

I nodded.

"All out of guesses?" I queried.

"Last one left the war-bag half an hour ago."

"You know what these Sharp fifty-caliber rifles is used for?"

"No, not special."

"Ain't you ever seen those old-time scouts, with long hair, buckskins, and beaded fringe to their deerskin shirts, romp into town, all ready to lap up fire water?"

"You means buffalo hunters?"

"Bright feller. With these broad hints you executes your lesson and proceeds right to the head of the class. We are going to hunt buffalo; they pay five dollars in gold for a hide. Is not that better than cow-punching at forty a month?"

"Yep, if you know the game," says Shorty. "In that case this rifle could make me rich. I'll have to count cartridges and see how much I make."

I laughed, liking to keep him in suspense.

"But does you know this buffalo hunting?" he insists.

"Surely I does," I assures him, which was true. "We can pilgrim north and have something to show for our trip."

Then I tells Shorty 'bout the hunting trips I had been on with my father, an old-timer at game hunting. How the buffaloes had been destroyed, herds miles in length, because they was the living, visible food supply of the Injun tribes.

As long as the redskins could get fresh meat, or even dried, they could stay on the warpath; it was starvation more than defeat in battle that drove 'em back to the reservations.

Now that the wandering herds of buffaloes were getting smaller and more scarce, the robes were worth money—allus more demand as the stock on hand dwindles.

Shorty appears pleased, but still I believe he thinks he should be dressed like a hunter, for puzzled lines deepened under his eyes.

"You can shoot?" I asks, casual.

"Shore; try me."

"Does you think these buffaloes waits to see if you has long hair and doeskin leggings 'fore allowing you to plug 'em?"

"No," he says, slow, "but I don' expect to be much of a hand at this here skinning."

No lack of nerve there.

"Get your meat first, partner," I laughs. "You is like the feller who measures the spot over the fireplace, observing the possible spread of antlers, and then goes out to find his deer."

Shorty subsides at that, figuring himself premature, but I'm danged if he don't, when he thinks I'm not looking, go on counting the cartridges in that big belt swinging over his shoulders.

But the math'matics is too much for him, and he gives it up.

Our broncs make good time, going at a steady lope, a pace of their own we in no way interferes with. 'Less there is some good reason a cow-puncher, with sense, does not push his mount needless, because you can wear out hossflesh just like anything else by rough treatment.

That night we camped near a winding stream that was an offshoot of the Red Hide River. Buffalo grass was frequent now, and by the next day we might be in their fav'rite kind of country.

Shorty, being like a kid in some respects, seems disappointed because they don't show up soon as we speak of them.

We made a fire by the bank of the stream, under a high bluff. As the sun goes down in a glory of colors, the air changes on the prairie as if at a wand of magic. A cold, chill breeze will spring up from nowhere; and the warmth of the driftwood fire was good to feel.

With our back protected and the rest of our frames toasting near the flames, that cast a ruddy reflection in the water and cut a circle in the darkness, we were comfort'ble as could be.

Every once in awhile Shorty would throw some more greasewood on the flames, and the fire would spring up in higher golden points, a-dancing, and the genial heat was right welcome.

Near by, our hosses were hobbled, so there was no risk of their wandering away during the night.

Sometimes a wild stallion in the hills with his bunch of mares will scream a challenge or call. Either way, as a bid to battle, or a summons to join the band, your hoss responds, and in the morning you wake up to find the animal gone.

And high cowboy heels is not meant for walking. There is a power 'bout the frenzied, free scream of a wild stallion that a gentled equine cannot resist; it stings the blood into savage revolt.

Even if hobbled, a pet pony will tremble, like in a fit, and try to pull loose. So it is best to be on the safe side.

Shorty and I were lounging there, talking of things indifferent. You'd 'a' thought, listening, that he was a hundred and ten years old, and me a hundred, both with long white beards and crutches. But kids pick up range gossip early from their elders and treasure same for man talk.

Sudden out of the darkness a shape intruded into the circle of light cast by our camp fire.

Both of us were on our feet instant, guns out, covering the stranger, whoever he might be.

"Advance, hombre, hands clear of your sides," I tell him, quiet. "You oughter have better sense and bark or something when you approaches a fire where you ain't known."

As if at a hint, Shorty steps back immediate into the dark, out of sight, in case there's going to be any human target practice.

The figure, some bent over, comes nearer, and I see an old critter with a long musket hanging under his arm and nearly touching the ground. He is in deerskin complete, but all black and dirty, and his keen, tanned face is the same.

A coonskin cap pulled down over his forehead, and gray locks tumbling to his shoulders, gives him an old-man-of-the-woods appearance. This party is calm enough, mebbe dumb.

He lays down his musket, shifts a powder horn swinging from a leather cord, and warms his hands before the fire. The fingers were long and flexible, and the color of baked clay. His keen eyes, gray, under protruding eyebrows, kept peering around.

"Folks are entire inhospit'ble these days when an old trapper can't sit in friendly at a white man's camp fire. I'm welcome at any Injun village from here to beyond the Rockies, if they ain't putting on war paint."

The stranger's voice was deep, yet had that cracked sound of one who don't talk much.

"Humph," grunted Shorty, coming into view. "These aborigines, I hear, ain't very particular about the company they keeps."

The old trapper turned on him with a snort of disgust.

"Young feller, I'm old enough to be your pappie. Why, I been an Injun scout 'fore you was weaned."

"That ain't no reason to brag about consorting with a lot of redskins, murdering wimmin and children when they gets a chance. Why they likes you? Does you peddle them fire water or rifles?"

The old scout turned a severe face on Shorty.

"I didn't come here to horn in on nothing—and I can make my own camp fire; one that can't be seen and read for miles in every direction. I jist came to warn you fellers.

"Cochise and his Apaches are putting on feathered bonnets and holding big medicine ready to go on the war-path. The young braves are painting their bodies and having communion with the Big Spirit.

"I dunno where they will attack first, but small parties is taking a ruinous risk. I'm on my way to warn the ranches to get all stragglers behind walls."

He arose easily to his feet and picked up his rifle.

"Young squirts like you should be taught manners. Take an old scout's advice. Put out that fire and scoot to safety; that is, if you don't yearn to have your scalps drying in front of a wigwam."

Before we could answer he glides away into the night, moving at a quick, if slouchy, pace that would take him far.

CHAPTER X.

INJUN SIGNAL FIRES.

MEBBE we may appear foolish or reckless, but we didn't pay no heed to that old scout's advice, well meant, no doubt. We kept the fire going the same and drowsed before it. The reason was that false alarms of Injuns' raids and uprisings were so frequent everywhere they became a nuisance to lissen to.

It was always an excuse for some old desert rat that thinks he is another Daniel Boone, and lies 'bout being an ex-army scout, to pile in with an alleged tale of Injuns out for blood; and tuck in a pile of food while alarming folks unnecessary.

As a matter of fact, these old floaters were allus under suspicion of supplying Injuns with whisky and arms and ammunition; these last they couldn't buy for love of gold at any store in the West, yet they was always well supplied with both.

The safety from having their hair raised that old trappers enjoyed, while mixing with the savages, and at times even becoming squaw men, made most folks give them a hard look and steer clear of them.

Yet we had been discourt'ous and we both admits it. However, you does get touchy and on edge in strange territory. They used to say on the plains that those lived longest who shot first and asked questions afterward.

We let the fire die down in its own good time, curled up in our ponchoes, and went to sleep.

Next day, 'bout noon, we advanced into reg'lar buffalo country. All the signs. Here and yon in the grass was cuplike depressions, bull buffalo wallows, where the animals, shoulders to the ground, had pivoted and made holes, in play, I guess, since I never hears any other explanation.

Suddenly, without warning, I sights a herd of buffaloes, feeding and reposing on a gentle slope westward.

"Hobble your hoss," I orders Shorty, and as he does so I follows suit immediate.

Fortunate for us the buffaloes are down the wind—we can creep upon them without a scare—the breeze is blowing from them to us; other way around you couldn't see their shaggy black hides for dust.

Carefully we creeps on hands and knees toward the herd, I guess a couple of hundred buffaloes in it, but I could not figger exactly.

"Wait ontil we are four hundred yards away," I whispers to Shorty, "and let me have the first shot."

The buffaloes, not being able to get our scent, feed on indifferent and we get into rangé. I select a big black bull, who looked like a leader.

"There's the spot where the animal is vulnerable," I tells my bunkie, "right behind the foreshoulder. Watch my smoke."

I sights above the grass and get a good, steady bead. Crash! My rifle has a kick like a mule, but I reloaded at once, half an eye on the result of my fire.

That bull buffalo rebounds on his haunches and shakes his head from one side to another as if dazed. His shoulder is ripped wide open, the raw meat showing, and suddenly he topples over one one side.

The nearest buffaloes, sniffing blood, crowd and mull around, shaking their horns and trying to be the first to gore their fallen leader.

"Now aim and shoot deliberate," I cautions Shorty, and we blazes away, firing at will.

In that ten minutes before the wind changes and the herd scampers away, one black line of fright, we slaughters twenty-seven buffaloes, pumping as fast as we could load and get the right aim.

I cautioned Shorty, and we slits their throats to avoid the chance of being gored by a dying bull, who can be vicious and mean; the wicked, tiny eyes tell you that. Then I show Shorty how to help strip the green hides; he revolts from the task, but stays to it, game clear through.

This work took the rest of the day, and was a task a trifle too much like a butcher's to appeal as a reg'lar occupation.

But the robes would be worth one hundred and thirty-five dollars if none were spoiled by hidebugs.

We camped that night in the open, without finding any fresh water. After cooking supper, including buffalo steak, which is dark and brown tasting, once enough for a long time, I followed a hunch.

The air was warm and sultry and I suggested to Shorty that we put out the fire. Just exactly where we were I did not know, but we were still heading due north. It seemed funny to me that we were not running into any riders, or covered wagons going somewhere.

For several days we wandered on without encountering anything to break the monotony. At water holes, where we stopped there were signs of disturbance around the edge where animals had pushed near to drink, but no newcomers succeeded that old trapper with his tale of redskins. Nor did we see another herd of buffaloes.

Shorty had declared himself off being a hunter, anyway.

"It ain't the shooting I'm ag'in'," he says. "It is the skinning. A job for a Mexican if I ever saw one. Cowpunching at forty a month is plenty good enough for me, with chuck and a place to recline in the bunk house."

"Well, dragging these hides all over creation ain't making no hit none with me," I assures him.

I know we experiences a mutual relief three days later when we observes fresh wagon tracks and then away off in the distance one of those small, Godforsaken little hamlets that now and again get plunked down in the middle of the prairie.

A link in a stagecoach line, a center for supplies for far-flung ranches, might be reasons; sometimes there didn't seem to be any at all except the stubbornness of a few sun-baked plainsmen who wanted to get as far away from civil'zation as possible.

You may be certain we heads our hosses directly toward this evidence that while there's life there's hope. Our excitement even was contagious to our broncs, for they picked without any encouragement. Distances is deceiving, but in a hour we broke the funeral calm of the one street that was asleep in sun and dust.

Two stores, a saloon, and a livery stable, with the paint gone years since, was ready to fall down and say howdy.

Not a soul in sight, but two hosses

were standing motionless at the hitch-post.

"Let's try and get rid of these buffalo hides first thing," said Shorty.

I knew that I no longer had a buffalo hunter with me; so I humors him. A great little feller, he was a range drifter at heart, and nothing was going to make him any different.

We stops our ponies in front of a faded sign:

GENERAL STORE

Throwing our reins over their necks we marches in to a big vacant, barny place, dark at first after the glare outside.

An old feller fingering a white goatee, with a black vest over his flannel shirt, comes forward from the back.

"Howdy, strangers. Welcome to Hopetown."

"Howdy," we replies cordial. "Just passing through, on our way north, and wonder if you could accom'date us by trading in twenty-seven of the nicest looking buffalo robes you ever see."

"Mebbe," he says, cautious. "Haul them in—or better still, I'll come out and look 'em over in the light. My eyes ain't what they used to be. Of course they are fresh?"

"Yeah," I said, "but you have lots of space round here for curing grounds."

He grinned. There was more space than anything else.

"I got a worthless Mexican boy who has a hankering for work—if pressed."

Shorty nudged me. "Didn't I tell you, partner, it was no kind of slavery for a white man, free, single, and full of vices."

The long and happy of it was that the storekeeper examined and counted our hides, and told us true that we had slaughtered a mature batch of bulls in the flower of their age. He'd give us five in gold a robe, and the drinks was on us.

"You are a gentleman and what passes for a scholar," I told the old bird, hearty. "Where does we adjourn for this here libation?"

I was trying to please him by acting as if this was a big town with lots of choice.

"If Henry ain't asleep he will oblige us," said our trader, p'inting with his thumb next door.

First we helps him cart the skins into a sort of room for storing material he has at the back of his place.

Then the three of us breeze into the one saloon Hopetown affords.

The owner and barkeep was up and ready. Guess he had seen us ride into town. We was introduced by Mr. Murray, who had the saloon; he wasn't a regular barkeep, you might say, 'cause he had no white apron.

"Gents," he says with a nice smile, "the only thing we can keep fresh out here is our thirst. Our choice of beverages is one, namely, whisky. But none of same has killed anybody yet, even perks us up a bit."

"Four glasses, sir, and guess that will be our pleasure all around," I announces, and plunks 'bout the last gold piece that separates Shorty and me from utter poverty on the mahogany.

Shorty pushes the bottle to Mr. Douglas, but he insists on our pouring four fingers first off. Finally we was all ready to gulp and with a p'lite nod we does so.

Mr. Douglas and the proprietor both buys a drink, and then the former, a courtly nice gent if he was in business, counted out our money for us as pleasant as a gambler would be paying off a bet.

"How far, might I ask, will we drift north, 'fore we hits Gorge City?" I asks, listlesslike, as if to pass the time, while I made circles with the bottom of my glass on the bar.

I saw glances exchanged between the two men.

"Mr. Flint," drawls the saloonkeeper," I should judge, not pushing your hosses, it will be a good two days' going."

"Railroad going in there soon?" I queries.

"Yeah, near there now. Got to Fort Pearson, twenty miles east."

"Nice town?"

"All depends what you are looking for."

"We figures some of the ranches thereabouts would want some A-1 help," Shorty puts in.

"Humph! They wants men handy with their shooting irons as well as lariats, and if you is desp'rate characters all the better."

Mr. Murray appears to try to throw a scare into us.

Scaring is something Shorty and I is not up on, fail complete; I guess at school we never did no home work on the subject.

"We never lets no hostile varmints crowd us none; we is plumb p'isonous when riled," opines Shorty, looking as meek as a lamb, if it weren't for a cold little glitter in those cold eyes of his.

"Oh, the country up thataway is all right," counters Mr. Douglas, "only there is so much gold flowing into a couple of counties that it makes folks greedy.

"And, as usual, on the frontier law and order allus lags a couple of years behind; the votes is against it, so to speak."

"Virtue does seem kind of unappreciated when things is booming," I agreed. "Mr. Murray, will you be so kind as to fill 'em up again?"

The bottle went bowing around to each in turn.

"Cattle is high in price up North?" I questions.

"Ten—fifteen—sometimes twenty dollars a head," the saloonkeeper answers. "They runs 'em to a slaughter pen and to the railroad fast as they come in."

I commenced to understand how the local herds of longhorns had become exhausted, and with an armed gang on each ranch, they reached far south for wholesale murder and rustling. Far as the ranch where they'd killed my pore father and brother, and stole our hosses and herd.

A tiny pulse began to beat like a hammer on my temple, at the right side, and I had that restless feeling of one who has lost time. But only cold and deliberate would I have my revenge.

But I believed I had asked 'nough questions without overjumping the bounds of good taste. Confirmed question putters never become popular in the West.

Those several hours we stays in Hopetown, Shorty and me handles our likker quiet, like gents should, letting it lay where it belongs along the belt line, and not going wild to the head.

Things was pleasant all around; we replenishes Mr. Murray's cash box with a few gold coins, and gives back several more to Mr. Douglas for some new food supplies. On fruit, put up in jars, Shorty and I are both particular gluttons.

We rides away with cordial greetings to and fro, and handshakes mutual. It is a pleasure to meet and do business with gents like these who meets you halfway.

When we are out of sight of Hopetown—which came into temporary fame the following month—I divides a hundred dollars in gold with Shorty.

"It does not seem right, taking money for them dirty hides," he sighs, gleeful.

"Don't worry, kid, when they are sewed into buffalo robes old Douglas will make plenty. They didn't give the stock of buffaloes time to breed, and it is running low on the plains."

Shorty nodded. The gold made him cheerful; like most cow-punchers, he could not imagine it none, he had to feel it.

"From now on, Harry," he tell me, "I leave any financial motion you make as already passed. This is the first time I ever rides into a strange

range with more 'n a month's pay in my jeans. As a general rule I has 'bout a dollar to spin for ham and eggs and coffee."

"Cow-punchers is allus improvident," I replies.

"What does that mean?"

"It is a word you should learn, meaning him who squanders his all and ain't got any money left."

He glances at me with admiring wonder.

"No wonder you leads me, Harry. You have eddication a plenty."

I grinned, having been saving that word ever since I heard a lawyer sharp say it down in Jacksontown.

We kept on going well into late afternoon, riding into rolling country with here and there a softly rising hill to the west and east. Our canteens had been filled before leaving Hopetown, so there was no actual need of fresh water, though, of course, we always likes it. But more miles remained to be covered before we decides to call it a day and pick out a camp for the night.

Suddenly I saw, rising from behind a distant hill, westward, a sight that drew me up quick, and Shorty, too. A long smoke length was unwinding up to the heavens. It was thin and black, but now and again the smoke thread was cut off, and white showed; black and white, black and white, with uneven pauses between; an Injun signal fire.

The savage has a code all his own, which is a forerunner of the white man's dot-and-dash Morse used for the telegraph.

Simultan'ous our heads turn to the east. There, also, in the distance, another smoke line is ascending, answering back. By holding a blanket now and ag'in over a green leaf fire, one buck is answering the message of another. They was getting together on plans, so to speak.

And as we swung in between them it was prob'ly in the cards that the war talk had something to do with the highly valuable scalps that up to now has belonged to Shorty and me.

CHAPTER XI.

THE RESCUE.

"WHAT say?" queries Shorty.

"War parties of young bloods, undoubted, but there ain't anything to do but go on. I'd be ashamed to crawfish before some degen'rate Injuns and return to Hopetown hotfoot."

"Me, too. We'll eat cold grub tonight. Mebbe they haven't noticed our trail at all. Let's get some speed out of these hosses of ourn."

I rowels Blackie a bit, and he breaks into an easy gallop. Shorty urges his pinto pony, and we tries to beat the wind, in hope of getting ahead of these hostiles. We ain't actually seen them. Perhaps they is plumb unconscious of our prevading along the prairie?

The thought was nice and encouraging, but not for long.

On the sky line westward I observes the outline of some turbanned savages, naked from the waist up, armed with rifles they carries hanging against the flanks of their ponies.

Chances are they have Winchesters 'stead of flintlocks. There is plenty of white renegades, as I hinted some time back.

"We will keep on a going till our trails touch, and then duck to shelter," I says.

And just then I hear the report of a single rifle from some'ers ahead of us, and a cry for help that sounds like it was in the voice of a white party.

Over the curve of the prairie we gallops. There, in a hollow, surrounded by a few green shrubs, is a sight that knocks the breath out of my chest. On the ground, strewn around as they fell, lies eight or nine painted redskins, dead and gone to glory. Their ponies must have run away.

In the hollow, behind a breastworks of hosses lying down, is two parties, but what surprises me beyond doubt is that one is a girl.

"You heard my rifle shot," she whispers, getting to her knees. "Dick and me repulses two charges of the Apaches, but I have noticed their fires and knew they were getting reënforcements."

Meantime I give a good look at her companion, who is down, out, and gone. There is no fight left in him for this scrap, if any other.

"Your hosses?" I queries.

"Both dead."

"Then we'll join you, ma'am," I said, speaking, I knew, for Shorty. "That young feller with you don't look as if he could be moved none."

More like he appeared dead to me, but I didn't say so.

We dismounts and makes our hosses lay down at the back, forming something of a circle. After one good inspection I see that the mounts belonging to this fem'nine party are dead.

The young feller with the girl is shot in the head and in the chest under the heart. Nice looking; just unlucky. However, he has a Winchester which is fine, as our Sharp rifles, though making a big hole, and carrying far, have only a single shell.

"Dick tried to make me hide down behind one of the hosses, but I insisted on using a gun," explained the girl.

"You two did very well, according to the evidence remaining out there," I told her. "How did this war party happen to trap you?"

"We — we — blundered right into 'em. We could have made a run for it with a decent opportunity, but their first shots downed our hosses. Their two charges we sent flying back, then Dick was terribly wounded—and I was waiting here—till they showed up with reënforcements. I'd sworn they'd never take me alive."

She paused, her lips trembled, and she started to cry.

"Another hour and I'd have been dead," she said, drying her tears. "I'd have kept the last bullet for myself."

The gal's emotions were running away with her.

"Are you far from home?" I asked, to change the subject.

"Yes, sir—we—we were eloping—aimed to make Hopetown to-night—and catch the stage East to-morrow."

Neither Shorty nor I spoke. This shore was a pitiful finish to love's young dream. I knew enough of bullet wounds to see this young feller hadn't a ghost of a show; he'd laid his hand down, and it was beaten. That shot had landed too near the heart.

There was no possible use of trying to be consoling in a case like this. Still we couldn't leave a dying man to be scalped by the Injuns; he might linger for hours in that border land between life and death.

If only night would come we might get clear through. 'Course this task of repulsing Apaches did not appeal none to Shorty or I. Still it was the presence of that girl that made the affair so embarrassing. She was purty, too, with big brown eyes open so wide and appealing; and her mouth was soft and aquiver from the ordeal she had gone through.

Fortunately she did not realize that she had lost her feller for good. Guess she thought he had fainted from loss of blood, but would be A-1 again if he got out of this. I was glad she had made this mistake.

"Will the Apaches attack again?" she appeals to me.

Shorty grins.

"I don't know," I lies, for somehow I felt their charge wouldn't be long a coming.

We had hardly settled into place behind those hoss breastworks when I saw the Injuns galloping from two directions, mebbe a score in both bands. They came together for a counsel north of us, naked bodies painted red and black, their ponies' tails gaudy with

strips of colored cloth, and their manes bright with feathers.

Turbans was wrapped around the heads of these wicked-looking braves, and they was all armed with rifles they waved above them, as they yipped in shrill voices to one another.

Suddenly they started in single file, at about a thousand yards from us, to circle around the hollow in which we lay. They was yip-yipping a war cry that sounded bloodthirsty enough, and seemed to lift their ponies up with their legs. They was all riding bareback, and so had no stirrups.

As if playing a game of foller the leader, they started to whirl around and around as in a circle, always getting a little nearer. If they was trying to show us how well they could ride, they sure succeeded.

I made the gal lay down by pushing her forcible with my left hand.

"We two can take care of this," I urges. "Lissen, lady, what would we do with a dead female on our hands?"

"That's right, Harry," said Shorty, "tell her to think of us."

But she insists upon peering over the dead animal's flank.

Shorty didn't have to be urged to wait until these bucks got within a sure killing distance. He had his Sharp, I had another, and also the dying man's Winchester and ammunition belt for same.

The Apaches started shooting at mebbe eight hundred yards, but no savage has ever learned to pull down the front sight of his rifle. It was just noise up to now, yelling, drumming of hoofs, and these harmless bullets sailing over our heads.

But as they circled nearer, Shorty and me let them have it. We downs two leaders with our Sharps, and then instead of reloading I switched to the Winchester; and Shorty, like a blamed fool, jumps up and leaps over a dead hoss, running forward with both revolvers pumping lead at close quarters.

The charge broke and went by, on either side of the hollow. All together we had accounted for eight more Injuns; we could count their ponies running around wild and reckless.

Whether or not these here Injuns had any mistaken ideer that they were charging a lone woman or not, of course we never knows. Or if they knew, before trying to stampede over us, that the two forces had joined.

Fighting these redskins is not like a game where all the details come out afterward. These same scalp-yearning savages, after leaving the warpath, will come into a town so peaceful you could make 'em eat out of your hand; and all you can get out of them are grunts and "Me good Injun."

They all gathered together in a body for a confab, and it looks from where we squint that there is a powerful difference of opinion. Mebbe the chief has been wiped out, for no one brave is in command.

I called to Shorty, who was standing outside the barricade of hosses, walking up and down defiant like.

"Come back here, you fool!" I yells. "What are you trying to do—show off before the young lady?"

He flushed under his leathery tan. Without a word Shorty awkwardly sprawled over a dead hoss, and, lying down at my side, started to reload his rifle.

"Every time, after this, I sees a meek looking blanket Injun in a cow town, I'm going to bend a gun over his head," he growled. "They're treated too much like humans, that's what. Who was the genius who orates: 'The only good Injun is a dead Injun'?"

I chuckled, but the girl did not change expression. He should by rights have cheered her up a bit; for he talked as if there was *no doubt* we would get through this fray alive. This was an example of the old Western spirit; and the odd thing was, it works.

In this pause I examined again the young feller who'd been so hard hit. His face was part yeller and white, and his lower jaw sagged down. A fatal sign. Feeling his wrist, I found it cold, and I could detect no pulse-beat. Nor at the temple, either. The blood was matted around his heart something terrible, and I knew there was no need of going any further.

He had cashed in his chips, sure, without a word.

"Ma'am, I'm sorry to inform you that the young feller has done crossed the last frontier," I told the girl.

To my surprise she took the news dry-eyed.

"No luck," she mutters, slow, to herself. "No luck—even when the cards weren't stacked against us."

She sat gazing blankly into space, far away, I observes, from Injuns and this fight for life, and quite obliv'ous of Shorty and me. The shock had been too great; she was now numb to what was going on.

You-all may be sure that I was sorry for her and her young feller, snatched away from youth and happiness just when he had it in his grasp and was thirsting for enjoyment. But, as the saying goes, it was no time for repining. We had a fight on to stop joining him.

Those Injuns had made up their minds, or what passes for such, that they would risk another charge. They straggled into a wavering line, but they had become more cautious.

Seeing that there were so few of us, compared to them, they kept their distance for awhile, taking pot shots and figuring mebbe they might be lucky and reduce the defendants.

"Let 'em get nearer," I advises Shorty, "and don't try galloping out again. It ain't so much I loves you; I needs you. I think a few more bucks blown to the happy hunting grounds and they'll start counting noses."

At a distance of four hundred yards, while two young painted braves in advance is yelling and firing, getting confidence from our silence, I nods to Shorty, and we takes a bead on our rifles long and steady.

Plunk—plunk—it shore was pretty, those redskins slid off their ponies plumb discouraged like, diving head first to the ground.

The other braves pulled their ponies back on their haunches and retreated out of range, of which, I believes, it may be said without fear of argument, Injuns have never been good judges.

Faint and soft, dusk was commencing to steal over the prairie. The sun was behind some clouds and I wished I was somewhere else. There was not a thing cheerful 'bout the situation of being cast in with that dead feller and the sweet looking but sad featured girl who was all woe and sorrow. Women is lovely creatures, as we all admits, in their place; but this was not exactly the place.

"They won't attack at night, that's certain," I announces just to break the gloom. "Dawn is their fav'rite time to carve out a few scalps for themselves. But we won't be here. When it gets pitch dark we'll make a dash north for it."

I don't think the girl hears me—anyway, she continues tongue-tied. Well, I only hopes, some day, a purty thing like her will feel bad when I gets took off, that's all. She was far away, on the sea of her own troubles.

Shorty and I, getting right sensible, compares notes.

I finds he has a wound in his left arm, but the slug had only plowed through the flesh, and the sleeve of the shirt had stuck to it like a bandage. It would keep.

"Nothing to worry 'bout," he remarked. "It ain't bleeding, and it don't hurt my shooting."

Me, my Stetson had been ruined complete by a stray bullet that had settled it back on my head. Mebbe if I changed the creases it would still be worth wearing.

We counted a good supply of ammunition, as we hadn't wasted none.

Now it appeared for shore those Injuns didn't like our medicine any. They must have begun to believe it much stronger than theirs, and so decided to play a waiting game. Charging only added to their losses.

You know every redskin carries, in a little bag about his neck, his own partic'lar medicine that he goes in search of and finds himself once he has come to manhood. If any one sees it, same loses strength.

It may only be some dried leaves, a few bits of bone, a length of colored ribbon; but, being superstitious, he blames or praises his medicine 'cording to how things work out.

I guess they must be figuring the white man's medicine exceedingly strong, and give it credit for the slaughter made by his guns. Mind you, I'm not trying to explain the mental goings-on of these loco savages; but sometimes you can foller them in a backward sort of way.

We partakes of a cold feed, Shorty and me did; the girl sits there vacant-eyed, with her hands in her lap, just staring—staring into the distance. If it had been a man, we might have tried to jar him into being regardful, but regulating women is out of our line.

Dance hall queens we may have some notions 'bout, but not nice girls, with no war paint on, like this one. When she refuses to eat we says no more.

I am reclining, so to speak, with my back against a dead hoss, Shorty being on guard, when my roving glance happens to settle on something that brings me a remarkable discovery.

The hoss was a bay color, and there was nothing out of the usual in that. Hundreds of same were cropping grass from here to Montana. But the brand on this equine catches my attention at once, particularly as no effort has been made to change it by no expert with a running iron.

Talk about cold, bare-faced nerve! There branded on this hoss, plain for all to read and see, was the mark my father had originated down in the Panhandle country—the Bar T. It had been registered and everything.

This was one of the hosses those murderers had run off our range the day my father and brother had been wiped out, and I had been so powerless to help.

I had thought of those pass-words my dying brother had given me as a way of getting in touch with those rustlers and killers I was after. Now chance had provided a link that might lead far.

All I has to deal with at present is a pretty young female, sad from losing her man, and mebbe quite ignorant. Yet she might, unknowing, point the way for me to go far on my trail of vengeance.

CHAPTER XII.

COMING THROUGH.

THERE were points about the coming of darkness and our slipping away into the night that are not clear to this day. I mean that what we did is easily enough told; what the Injuns was up to I do not know, so cannot tell.

They did not attack again before night, and after that, whether they waited for dawn, or gave us up as a bad job, is a question. Personal, I do not think that we could have got by their scouts, no matter how cautious we might be.

I believe that, with nightfall, what was left of that war party stole silently away to find easier victims; we had proved tough meat, and I guess they had as much of us as they wanted.

Injuns were spurt fighters, as a rule; they either won or lost in a hurry. And sometimes on the verge of victory they gave up the battle as no longer worth waging.

I'll give us credit for taking ambi-

tion out of 'em, but as neither Shorty or me claimed to be scouts, I won't make bold to say we rode craftily through the guarding line of braves. It don't sound probable, and it ain't.

In the first place, we was vastly overloaded. Shorty had the dead young feller, whose name we learned was Dick Darley, slung over his hoss, and the girl, who murmured her name—Mary Renwood—when questioned, rode behind me.

Of course we were forced to leave a part of our supplies behind, but even so we were both, Shorty and me, traveling double. We didn't like to leave the young chap to be scalped, if the Injuns did tarry to rush the hollow at dawn; but at the first brush with them in the night Shorty was to cut the dead body loose.

I carried behind me the precious freight. And I was glad Blackie, my pers'nal hoss, was a good built equine instead of a little cow pony.

The gal jumps up behind me, and I whispers for her to take a good holt on my belt. Off we starts, aiming to make a wide loop east, and then push our hosses northward. It being spring, and the land verdant and soft, the hoofs of our mounts make no noise.

They might have done so had we ventured a gallop, but we were proceeding cautious under that black tent of darkness, hoping for the best, silent shades flitting in the night.

I heard tell, once, of a trapper who tied his pony's hoofs with strips of blanket to muffle sound, and so went plumb noiseless through a range thronged with hostiles. It never listened right to me. What if said liar actually needed some speed from the equine between his legs?

What then, I asks? He might just as well have wrapped his pony in a bedquilt and declared hisself a bad last in the race. We never even considers such foolishness. There's been, first and last, lots of wonderful tales spilled by trappers and scouts, mostly 'bout things they did when alone, so no one could check up on 'em.

It was black as pitch when we started capering along. I held a loose rein, letting Blackie pick his own way. He could see—and feel—much better in the darkness than I could. Always trust your hoss—an old saying, but a good one.

Shorty's pony tailed behind. I actually prayed that we would not stumble on any camp of Injuns; that gal sitting behind me, her hair now and ag'in blowing against my face, was a terrific responsibility.

On one thing I was determined. If we wasn't lucky 'nough to come cl'ar through without blundering into a nest of redskins, killing me off was going to be made an expensive proceeding. The cost would come high.

It is peculiar how different you feels at night, on a strange range, and one you have ridden before. When you get the feel of a certain country in your blood, and the general outlines in your mind, you can edge your way with confidence, avoiding this bad spot and that almost by instinct. Your hoss knows, too, don't forget that, and acts different, accordingly.

I have no way of telling how far we wanders, nerves tense, each moment expecting a shrill yip-yip of discovery, and tomahawks swirling toward us in the night. Handled by inconsiderate savages, these weapons can flatten skulls like thin eggs.

Never orate to me 'bout the noble redskin. That talk is all right with those who never had to mingle with 'em, but these bloodthirsty felons was never what you'd call pop'lar in the West.

It was well for us that we were going over fairly level country, with no mesas shelving down to long, rocky drops, or dry stream beds, to come on sudden, where, somersaulting, both a hoss and rider could break their necks.

But we did not have the comfort of knowing we would avoid such things

till afterward. I can only speak for myself; I passed hours that were endless, slouched there in the saddle with that pore girl sorrowing so close to me, neither of us saying a word, trusting to the pony and the lord of luck to see us safe through.

You may believe me that the uncertainty was revolting. When the first gray haze of dawn lifted the blanket of night that was over us, and we started to see, if dimly and darkly, I felt as relieved as if some one had given me a gift.

Come what may, we could face what must be confronted in the light. After those long, chill hours before dawn, the day brings courage. You don't, after the sun comes up, have to fight any imaginary fears or foes.

Because Blackie and Shorty's pinto pony was fren's, they didn't stray away from one another in the night. I nods good morning to my bunkie, and together we scans the horizon keen and careful.

Nothing was to be seen, thank God, but a long stretch of prairie, with a few hills thrown against the sky. We had passed around that war party of Injuns and left it far behind.

Suddenly I hears a little faint voice behind me.

"If you don't mind I'd like to get down and stretch for a few minutes," said the girl. "I'm cold and stiff all over."

I couldn't dismount till she did, so Shorty jumps off his pony and catches her.

Then I alights from Blackie, and throws the reins over his head.

Mebbe the girl feels bad, but there is red roses in her cheeks, like those that grow near the old mission in the southland. Her hands go to her brown hair, which has tumbled down over her shoulders, a cloudy cascade of beauty, and she braids it like a schoolgirl, in one long plait.

"I knows how to protect a fire so it won't smoke," announces Shorty. "We must have some coffee to take that chill out of the bones."

There was just enough water in the canteens to fill the pot.

We gathered some dry twigs and shrubbery, and Shorty made a tiny fire, banking it carefully, and blowing the smoke with his hat so it did not ascend toward the sky. After the coffee was made we blanketed the flames and threw dirt on the ashes to stop any smoldering.

I poured a drink of the strong stuff and handed it to the girl. She drank it gratefully. To my stomach it registered more like lye than coffee, but there was heat and kick to warm up the system.

Shorty had saved a bottle of canned peaches, and we alls divided that and some broken biscuits, these last from an unsuccessful try of his to be a reg'lar chef. This was a funny breakfast, with no trimmings, but it sat well.

"You lady," I says, rolling a cigarette, "we're plumb lost and strayed. Has you any special ideer to tell us where we are?"

A little frown creased her brow. Honest, she didn't look a bit tired from that night riding; no lines under her brown eyes, and her cheeks and lips were pink and fresh. Shorty was haggard, and I bet I had as many lines in my face as in a book.

"This range looks a little familiar to me, but I'm not sure whether I can read the signs. If I am correct," she said slowly, "there is a water hole two or three miles north. But you can't trust me—"

She groped for a name.

"Harry Flint," I suggested, "only call me Harry. My partner here, the little feller who was dropped when young, is Shorty. He had a baptized name, once, but he has cl'ar forgotten it."

She laughed, with a note of hysteria that troubled me.

Of course, mebbe, it is funny to

start introducing after what we all have been through.

"Miss, you be our guide," I tell her. "Personal, we are headed toward Gorge City, where we hears both money and work is frequent."

"Why, my father's ranch is only twelve miles from there. He will want to thank you, of course, for saving my life. And bringing Dick's body back. Perhaps, too, if he is shorthanded, you boys can get taken on there."

But the little lady's tone was a bit uncertain, and after we get under way again I concludes it might be a good ideer to get down to cases.

"Miss—"

"Mary Renwood, Harry," she said softly.

"Well, Miss Renwood," I goes on, "I want you to feel that I am far from trying to intrude into your affairs. Still and all, I have a funny notion that a little furst-class lying will be called for. And that, if I say it myself, is where I shines."

"I don't understand," she quavers from behind me, and I feel her hands tremble on my belt, which she is holding onto.

"Well, I'm no detective, but I allows that you wouldn't have been on no eloping party if your father was favor'ble to your tying the knot with this young feller you fancies?"

"No," she falters, "father had other plans for me—despicable ones—that makes my blood run cold at the very thought. He wanted to force me into a marriage with Boss Deveture, of Gorge City."

"Boss?" I questions, "of what, miss, may I ask?"

"Everything in sight, you might say," she murmurs, bitter. "I never heard him called anything except Boss Deveture; it is like a title. He owns the Gorge City Hotel, the Oriental Saloon, is behind all the gamblers, has the law in his hands—and those hands reach out everywhere."

"Drunk with power, eh!" I said, almost to myself. "And he reaches out for you, miss?"

"Yes, though I have only seen him a few times, and never gave him the slightest encouragement."

I had to smile at that, seeing what a lovely little thing she was.

"Humph. Some hombres don't need any come-on," I opined. "Is your father and this Mr. Deveture pretty thick?"

"Boss Deveture has, somehow, a hold on all the prominent cattle owners in these parts, as well as on folks in town. Fear is at the root of his power, I imagine, more than any link of friendship."

"Nice feller, I bet," I said, "but going back to our original figuring. Why, if your father will be so dashed mad hearing about this fatal elopement—why tell him anything about it?"

She was silent for a few moments.

"I'm just trying to save you, miss; this cowboy you canters off with is past saving. Did you ever go on long rides with him?"

"Yes," she falters; "but how did you guess that, Harry?"

"Just brains, ma'am. Any likely young feller would glory in your company. Then my suggestion is, say you two were riding the range, when pursued by a war party of Injuns, and afterward, when your hosses were shot, stood a siege by these same varmints ontil we comes along and rescues you. Sech kind of affairs has actually happened."

"But—but that would be a lie," Mary replies in a hesitating sort of way.

"You ain't been long in this world, I calculate. Eighteen summers?"

"Nineteen."

"By and by you'll find truth ain't welcomed in the best society onless she is disguised so you'd hardly know her. If it will help you any I'll do the lying. My pard, Shorty, and me—we breeds

lies with our breath. Ain't that so, Shorty?"

"What?" he exclaims.

He hasn't been overhearing our conversation.

"I tells the young lady we're a couple of hair-trigger liars. Is that so?"

"Shore," he tallies. "Never believe anything, lady, either of us tells you. Me, I take all the prizes for tall stories at every contest, and my pal Harry produces whoppers that make old timers miss the stove when spitting, they is so ashamed."

But she sees the twinkle in his blue eyes.

"You boys can't tell me anything bad about yourselves," she said sweetly. "I owe my life to you; really you've both been simply wonderful."

Shorty pulls his four-gallon hat down over his eyes, and I'm glad she can't see me. There is no coming back at these yere female plays.

"Does you agree," I chips in hurriedly, "that we keeps the elopement a secret—and only horns in with the Injun story?"

"Yes, maybe it would be best. Poor Dick is gone—and I'll be in trouble enough without having a strict guard placed over me from now on."

"That wouldn't be wise," I sachays back, "'cause mebbe another cowpuncher would like to ride with you; and make a bid to be of help."

"Then we'll keep the elopement part a secret?"

"Yes," I said, "between the three of us."

I explains circumstances and all to Shorty, and he understands perfectly.

"A little lie is very helpful," he argues. "Now, if a pal of mine didn't swear, once, that I was where I waren't, they'd have had me flying higher than a kite, and no place to put my feet, down New Mexico way."

"What were you doing, Mr. Shorty?" asks the girl, innocent enough.

He plays with the reins.

"I looks like a feller who delivers a lot of rustled cattle across the border. When they comes up with me I am in my pal's cabin, at dawn, with three thousand dollars in gold in a money belt wrapped around my middle. My friend, he swears I'd been there all night, and won the cash from him playing stud."

"And did you win it gambling?" questions the girl.

Shorty never cracks a smile.

"My chum's total possessions was a no-good mining claim, two bags of flour, a box of coffee, a six-gun, and a lot of hopes all down at the bottom of a shaft. Lady, judge for yourself if he lied."

I could see she disbelieved him complete, because he kept a straight poker face. Me, I though the story had the ring of truth.

We rode on for several miles, and then we sighted the water hole in a nacheral bottom, shaded by some cottonwood trees.

"You was right, miss," exclaims Shorty. "Thar's the water hole you speaks of being in these parts."

Fresh water certainly went well, with beast as well as man and gal. The hosses had to be held back from wallowing in it. The canteens we refilled, and our fem'nine convoy washed her hands and face.

"Which is all habit," drawls Shorty. "Myself, I calls that a sheer misuse of water, which was only made to be swallered, and that sparingly."

"So you will continue as our guide, miss, after all," I tells the girl.

"I wish you boys would call me Mary," she says. "We surely are friends by now."

"All right, Marie," starts Shorty; and I gives him a kick in the shins.

"Pardon my lop-sided brained pal. He has what they calls a perverse sense of humor."

Mary smiled, flashing her pretty white teeth. She looked nice 'nough

to eat before, but when her lips rippled thataway she was too sweet altogether for a feller's peace of mind.

"I think," she ruminates, "that I can find my way back, boys, to the home ranch. It is due north, according to my reckoning."

"We follers like a couple of strays, Mary," says Shorty soberly. "That's a purty name, now I has the swing of same on my tongue."

Well, as we were getting ready to pilgrim onward, I wandered over casual like to Shorty's side, making believe to search for something in his war bags, and whispers to him my discovery—that one of the dead hosses with the party we rescued was rustled from my dad's ranch; brand not even changed, they was that plumb careless.

Shorty nodded, getting my attitude at once. Then he comes over and helps Mary mount behind me on Blackie. We alls were plenty refreshed and ready for a long ride. Well into the afternoon Mary picked up a few landmarks and finally declared we were on the border of the Renwood range.

We saw a few well-fed longhorns grazing fat and contented, but not many of 'em. All had a brand unfamiliar to me, Bar N, but no earmarks at all, which is becoming mighty usual in the West. So far we do not meet the trail of any riders.

About four o'clock, mebbe, we crossed the bed of a stream with a foot or so of clear running water tumbling over stones. We pushed across, and up an incline.

There in the distance is a ranch house standing alone, bleak and forbidding. Back at one side is a few outbuildings and a big corral. No trees to soften the outlines ag'in' the heavens, and, painted a dark gray, it waren't picturesque like so many ranch layouts in the Southwest. It seemed to say, strictly business, that's all.

But it was in crooked work that I was interested.

"Is that your home, Mary?" I questioned.

"It has to be," she replied, with a hint of desperation.

When we draws up before the main building I thought the place was deserted, and didn't like the looks any better on closer view.

Shorty jumped off his hoss and helped Mary to alight, then mounted again.

"Why, boys," said the girl almost tearfully, "you must stay for dinner. I invite you, even if no one is at home. You both look so stern."

It was a queer situation, bringing a girl and a dead man back to a strange ranch.

We both figured we would like to see more signs of welcome from men folks before making ourselves at home.

Just then a tall, rangy, heavy-set feller, with a long, sinister face, marched out from the main door entrance. He wore bat chaps that flapped as he walked. This man had a vest over his shirt, and his two thumbs were hooked over his belt; his hands were near two high-hung Colts with wooden handles, in old holsters.

He swaggered as if he owned the place and didn't like intruders on the property.

"Oh, Mr. Leary," said Mary, "I've come home—after such adventures. These two boys rescued me from a band of Injuns on the warpath. Dick was killed during the fight. Harry and Shorty, this is my father's range boss and foreman, Mr. Leary."

He looks us up and down, and we returns the compliment with interest. Shorty, I notices, can sneer just as if he heard the pedigree of a skunk.

"I see you brung Dick back," he says, low, "and all ready for the casket maker. Injuns, eh? Rescued, you say. Your father will like to hear more about this."

"Shore," I said, just as if he was cordial. "We delivers the corpse as a duty and Miss Renwood as a pleasure.

We are two cow-punchers drifting by who accepts your kind invite for a feed."

He stood there dumfounded, with his gray eyes wide open.

Shorty and I jumps off our hosses.

"Where does we plant said remains, Mr. Leary?" I asks, as if we were delivering goods.

"I'll be damned!" exclaims that foreman.

"Mebbe, never can tell," drawls Shorty seriously.

The girl's eyes danced, I think with pleasure.

Perhaps it was onusual for her to have two huskies on her side of an argument.

CHAPTER XIII.

SIX-GUN LAW.

LEARY kind of came to life.

"This is a shock," he said slowly. "I don't want to appear to be uncivil."

"No, 'tain't healthy," opines Shorty guilelessly.

"But we rode the range for thirty or thirty-five miles yesterday, looking for Miss Renwood, without the slightest result. We alls have been worried 'most to death, and her father was 'near out of his mind. Course I invites you boys to dinner. I'll help you with Dick's body; we will carry it over to a little storeroom next to the bunk house for now."

The girl watched us as we unloaded the rigid form, and then turned suddenly and went indoors. She had been bearing up bravely, in front of us, but I was sure I saw the trace of tears in her eyes.

Me, I had two things to stay for—the first to find the how and wherefore of that stolen hoss, and the second to lie for that girl. With the shock she had been under, she would not be able to stand the pressure of much questioning alone.

We carried the body of the dead boy to a cubbyhole next to the bunk house, dark as a hole, and deposited it on a bench.

Leary stayed right with us while we attended to watering and feeding our hosses, and even showed us the stalls in the stable where we might put them for the time being.

Meantime, as a matter of course, I tells him 'bout coming on Miss Renwood and the young feller, the last nearly dead, how we repulsed the savages and breaks through to safety during the night.

"How far away was that—er—"

"Harry Flint," I tells him, "and this is Shorty, my pal. Oh, as to distance, I can't rightly say. We wanders slow at night and takes our time. This is new country to me, and I can't figure out miles at all."

"No," says Shorty, scratching the back of his neck, "nor me neither."

"The young lady tells us the two of them was out riding, were pursued by the redskins, and final' had to make a stand when their hosses go down. The pore thing is all upset from what she has gone through."

"Well, well. Her father will be interested some in your story and hers," replies Leary, looking as if he was sure we were lying; but that does not faze us none to speak about.

"Mr. Renwood and the boys has all gone to Gorge City. I was halfway there and had to lope back for a document. But I'm going into town after supper. Want to come along?" he asks eagerly.

"Shore," I said; and I meant it more than he knew at that time.

There is no reg'lar porch, but where the dirt has been packed hard by hard usage there is a long wooden bench.

Shorty and me seats ourselves.

Leary stood before us, obscuring the view some, puffing at a cigarette. I allows he would like to stay with us like a plaster, but same isn't exactly possible, for different reasons.

"'Xcuse me," he pipes pleasantly. "I has to go into old man Renwood's office and look up a matter of importance."

"Shore," drawls Shorty. "We're plumb accustomed to our own pore company."

As Leary passes indoors, Mary comes out looking like a rainbow after the storm.

She has changed her riding habit, and is wearing a flowered dress, blue with white flowers on it, and looks more purty than ever to my eyes. I don't blame Boss Deveture none; I'd reach out my hands for her with half an opportunity.

Beckoning, I drew her a few paces away from the door.

"Quick, Mary—can you trust the cook?" I queries.

"Of course—why, she's my old nurse, Carrie. Why do you ask?"

"Well, tell her to clean up dinner 'fore any one returns, and both of you remembers one thing: *neither she nor you has seen hide or hair of Leary to-day.* Haven't seen him at all—get me, Mary?"

She looked bewildered.

"I'm going to fight your battles, little lady," I said quickly, "but you must do as I say."

The girl repeated wonderingly: "Neither Carrie nor I saw Mr. Leary to-day. When you boys brought me back to the ranch there was no one here except the cook."

"Dead perfect, Mary, and a lot may depend on it. You trust me, don't you?"

I looked deep into her brown eyes, and hers dropped first, but honesty and sincerity were written there for me to see.

"Yes, Harry, I do trust you; I must have some one in whom I may place confidence, or I'll go mad. You can't imagine how alone I have been."

The deep tone of her voice thrilled me, yet what was there for me to say to comfort her?

Indeed, with such an unnacheral father, as I knew Renwood to be, ready to dispose of his own flesh and blood to the highest bidder, I could see how alone this flower of a girl was among this gang of ruthless he-wolves.

As we turned back to the bench, Shorty jumped up and, with the crown of his Stetson, dusted off a place for Mary to sit down. And bowed gallant like; I didn't know it was in him.

"No, thanks," said Mary, "since Carrie has set the table in the dining room, I expect the bell any moment. You'll eat at the family table to-night, boys—not in the cow-punchers' chuck quarters."

Shorty murmured under his breath, and made a hurried plunge toward the pump. I followed him. As special company the thought of washing up for the occasion had occurred to him after all, and to me, too. He was wiping his hands offen his pants and making 'em four shades lighter when I joins him.

"On the way to town I'm going to spring a few things on Mr. Leary," I informs him.

"You have my permission," Shorty replies, indifferent.

"All right, kid, you watch my smoke."

Truth to tell, I was blazing and trembling inside, for the time I had waited for so long was a coming.

A cow bell rings the call to fodder, and we tries to wipe our faces on our sleeves and look like company. The table was set in the family dining room, tablecloth and everything. Shorty and me is both a bit self-conscious, and I kicks him under the table several times when he shows an inclination to bend over and kiss his food.

'Course all of us men is two-handed knife and fork workers, but that's to be expected. Mary Renwood, she eats delicate, and I glances at her furtive once in awhile.

The cook, an old lady wrinkled and tough, has nothing to say, just shoves

meat and spuds and so on in front of us and retreats. We spears our own, gen'ral, instead of asking for it to be passed.

I was breathing all kinds of relief when the meal is over and we adjourns outside. It didn't seem to me I could count twenty words let out by any one during the food fest.

There is a brooding amount of suspicion in the air, supplied by Foreman Leary. It is remark'ble how one man can p'isin the springs of friendly intercourse.

As I leaves the dining room Mary looks meaningly at me and nods her head slowly.

I takes this to indicate that she had spoken to Carrie, and that old party is ready to swear blue is black for the girl's sake, and that it is agreed neither has clapped eyes on Mr. Leary during the day.

There was no time lost getting to our hosses. Leary was mounted on a fine sorrel mare, and looked better on hossback, which is true of lots of riders.

Not a word was exchanged as we started away from the ranch across the plains.

But I haven't figured this out as what you might call a sociable trip.

I noticed Shorty was a trifle stiff holding the reins of his hoss.

"When you gets to town," I tells him, "ring in a doctor and have him put some linament on that wound of yours and bind it."

"You get shot?" asked Leary.

"Just creased," returns Shorty. "It ain't bleeding none."

Leary showed no further interest in Shorty's wound.

The three of us were riding abreast, but suddenly I canters somewhat forward and nods my head to Leary to catch up with me. The fact was that I wanted both to act secret, and keep my pal out of any possible line of fire.

Last time there was some killing for me to do, in the case of Slim Quarters he had done my job for me. Once was enough; I swore it wouldn't happen again.

"Mr. Leary," I whispers, "I have a message for you. *The Gorge City cattle pen needs filling.*"

He gazes at me with sudden, fierce interest. The passwords I had just given him were the ones my dying brother, Bud, had heard and repeated, a secret code between members of the gang working northward.

"You must be one of the boys," he say, low. "Harry Flint, I never heard of you, but you got the get-by message all right."

"There's lots, mebbe, you haven't heard about," I went on, furtive like. "I've been working down south. I helped pull off that blotting out of the Hawley ranch, and then breezed southeast to look up further work."

"Humph. That Hawley cattle arrived when buyers were fair hungry for same."

"Glad of that," I said, venturing blind. "Old man Renwood must be cleaning up a pretty piece of change."

"He is, but he's scared of the big boss."

"The big boss," I repeated, playing dumb and ignorant.

"Of course, you fool," rasps Leary. "Boss Deveture."

I whistles, thrilled all over. That is just what I wants to know, and all, I expect, that Leary can tell me. This gent has sure outlived his usefulness to me, and going on would certainly be in the way.

He thought I was a member of the gang because I had the password, but Renwood and Deveture, knowing everybody mixed up in the band, wouldn't be fooled for a moment. And my light would go out just as quick as that!

Aside, now, from being an obstacle in my path, Mr. Leary has a document on him he had spoken of a spell back that might be of interest. All in all, I

decides he must go. Yet I can't kill any human in cold blood.

I backs my hoss and screams a warning to Shorty. He gallops a few paces away.

"Leary," I yells, "you've told me all, and more, than I needed to know. So you're one of the murdering rats that I'm after, eh? Do you know who I am?"

"Why," he mumbles, taken aback, "Harry Flint, o' course."

He looks bewildered, but I presses him to the truth.

"You dupe," I snarls, "*I'm young Hawley,* whose fam'ly and ranch was wiped out by your thieving, killing band. But I'm giving you your chance. Draw! 'Cause I'm throwing down on you."

He streaked to his gun, but mine flashed fire from my hand while he was unlimbering.

Twice I shot, once at his heart, and then at his forehead. A moving target, but when I'm right I cannot miss. One bullet whizzed by my ear, another thudded in the dust at my hoss's legs.

Leary toppled in the saddle and then swayed forward. I galloped to the side of his mount and caught the body before it could fall to the ground. Shorty and me both dismounts and lays him down on the ground.

After placing his Stetson over Leary's face I searched for the document he speaks about, and finds it in a pocket inside his vest, on the right; so there was no blood on it.

Dusk was falling over the plains. There was no time for inspection of the paper.

"What did you discover?" asked Shorty briefly.

"That Renwood is one of the murdering cattle barons in the wholesale rustling conspiracy, and Boss Deveture the king of the evil ring. Those passwords made Leary think I was one of the gang he'd never met, and he talked."

"Pronouncing his death sentence," said my pal with a short laugh. "You gave him an even break, warned him to reach for his shooting iron, and reached him like lightning."

He glanced at the paper.

"Mebbe you better let me take care of that," he suggested, "for when we get to town a little birdie tells me you are going to be one conspic'ous party. And that has all the earmarks of a sheet supplying val'able information."

I agreed to the logic of this, and handed the paper over to him. Shorty folded it and tucked same under the sweat band of his Stetson, which is a place as good as another.

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK

BURIED TREASURE CANNOT COMPETE

HE looked for it in Boston, Brooklyn, and Baltimore,
And in sixteen other cities along our Eastern shore;
But failing here to find it, he pushed on to the West
And searched Detroit, Chicago, St. Louis, and the rest;
In these later cities of his luck he could not boast:
So he rambled on through Denver, Cheyenne, and to the Coast.
These Occidental cities he searched like one gone mad;
And because he was so frantic, there were some who said he had!
He tore down to Arizona to the desert's wide expanse;
And there it was he found it—'twas by the slightest chance.

Do not ridicule this fellow—he was not out on a lark,
He'd found what he desired, he'd found a place to park.

Wilfred Lindsay.

Scissored

By CHIEF HENRY RED EAGLE

A case of getting even with an enemy in which the palm for cruelty goes to the white man rather than the red

"WHAT do you think of this, Mac?" Pridefully the Indian shook out the pelt and laid it across the rude counter. Even in the semigloom of the ill-lighted store tiny gleams sparkled through the beautiful fur of the silver fox, and for a moment the dour old Scot was startled out of his phlegm; for in twenty years of fur-trading this was but the second silver he had ever seen. He stroked it almost reverently.

"A silver!" he breathed. "A true silver!"

Appraisingly he scanned the long, silky fur, noted the curing of the white skin, the skillfully fleshed head and paws; then he caught it by the tail and allowed the fur to fall back in thick, even folds. And as he appraised, he nodded his approval, muttering: "Aye, aye!"

"It's a beauty, lad," he pronounced finally; "wairth five hoonderd, if it's wairth a ha'penny. Last year's pelt, o' coorse, since it's prime an' foxes are still 'blue.'"

He squinted searchingly at the young Indian, whose straight carriage and direct gaze bespoke an honest self-confidence that was reflected by a white-toothed smile.

Nap Toon had been schooled "outside," and instead of the usual meekness and sullen stolidity with which his red brothers submitted to Mac's low appraisals of their furs, he radiated an air of independence that MacWilks respected. His respect was deepened by the fact that Toon enjoyed the reputation of being, not only one of the best trappers in the Cuperlax region, but a rugged man in a ruckus as well.

As a member of the American Expeditionary Forces he had won the sobriquet of "The Red Stecher" because of his wrestling ability in the camp tournaments; for once he clamped those muscular legs, steeled by long hours on woods trails, across

an opponent's midde in the "scissors," that man could chalk up a defeat against his record.

He could have accepted one of a dozen offers to follow the game professionally after his discharge, but the heritage of his fathers forbade. He preferred his traps, the joy of bucking the elements, and the moan of the wind through the tree tops.

And now he was going in to spot out his trapping line. At the river's edge his canoe nosed the bank, loaded to the gunwales with camp duffel, traps and wanigan. He nodded in reply to Mac's last statement.

"Yes, it's a last winter's catch. I did not turn it in with the rest of my fur last spring—for a reason. I've brought it to you to store for me until I come out next spring."

MacWilks eyed him a second, then chuckled. Idona, the half-breed daughter of Pierre La Forge, was "reason" enough. Pretty as a picture, and in a land where pretty women are rare, Idona had favored big, good-natured Nap from the first.

"Aye, an' small blame to ye, lad. She'll fancy it, I ken. An' ye want I shall keep it for un, come spring?"

Again Toon nodded.

"I'll gin ye a receip'. Storage 'll be in proportion to the resk o' loss," he added cannily.

"All right," agreed Nap, "but the loss can't be measured in dollars and cents, Mac, so guard it carefully."

"That I will," promised Mac.

MacWilks was scrawling a receipt, when the door opened and a stranger blustered in. Thrusting an aggressive blue-black chin forward, he rang a silver dollar on the counter and demanded a plug of chewing tobacco.

"And step on it," he growled as Mac continued to write. "I gotta date."

Mumbling in his beard at the peremptory tone, MacWilks, turned to the tobacco case, when the stranger sighted the fur.

"Cripes!" he gasped. "A silver! An' prime!"

He thrust his fingers into the fur, and, like MacWilks, submitted it to a searching appraisal.

"How much, Whiskers?"

"Hisn." Mac stabbed an ink-smudged finger toward the Indian, whom the stranger apparently noticed for the first time.

"Yourn, eh?" He extracted a bulky poke from his pocket and started to untie the knots. "Tell Whiskers to wrap it up, and I'll count out a thousand bones for it."

Toon deliberately snapped a match alight with his thumb nail and applied it to his pipe.

"It ain't for sale," he grunted between puffs.

"Whaddya mean, ain't for sale?"

"Just that."

"Oh, hell!" snorted the stranger. "Everything and everybody has a price. I want that pelt, and Lew Quinn gen'ly gets what he goes arter. I'll go as high as two grand, cash money. What say?"

"Your offer is fair enough; but, as I said afore, it ain't for sale," said Toon smilingly. Mentally he marked Lew Quinn down as "Blue Chin," and a hard customer.

"But, dammit, man," exploded Quinn, "what good is it if ye don't cash in on it? I want it for a weddin' present to th' gal as is goin' to be Mrs. Quinn."

Nap's smile deepened into a full-throated laugh, while Quinn's swarthy face went blacker.

"Ye laffin' at me?" he roared.

"'Scuse me. I wasn't laughin' at you, but with you. It struck me funny when you said that you wanted that fox for a weddin' present, for I am savin' it for the same reason, come spring."

"Oh! Congrats." Quinn's snag-toothed grin was not prepossessing, and his swinish eyes swept the Indian from head to foot; noted the dandified, gay-

colored sash, tasseled leggings, and fringed buckskin shirt.

"Goin' in or comin' out?" he asked.

"In."

"Trappin'?"

"Tryin' to. Why?"

"Thought ye mought be workin' for the movies," sneered Quinn.

It was Toon's turn to flush, and the air became charged with impending trouble, when Mac broke in:

"Here's yer receip', lad."

"Thanks, Mac."

When the Indian turned, after scrutinizing the receipt, Quinn had slammed the door.

"Surly brute," muttered the Scot.

"Oh, I dunno, Mac," answered Nap lightly as he tucked the receipt, together with his trapping license, away in the pocket of his shirt. "Guess he was disappointed because I wouldn't sell him that 'silver' for his girl. Two thousand dollars is double what a fur house will pay, and when a man is in love there's nothin' so disappointin' as not being able to get her what he knows she'll like. Well, that's that. Now, gimme a fancy box of them chocolates and keep an eye on my canoe, while I make jest one more call afore I hit the current."

The gay-colored box tucked under his arm and whistling blithely, Nap strode toward the little cabin of clean-peeled logs occupied by Pierre La Forge and his daughter Idona.

He recalled happily the events of yestereve, when he had paddled Idona into the eddy of the falls, and under the spell of the harvest moon and the drone of water that tumbled over the jagged ledges had pleaded his love, and the fair Idona had promised to wait.

And on the day that they were wed, Nap Toon had promised himself, he would present his bride with the "silver"; a present fit to adorn a queen. He executed a little jig.

Was it not droll that Blue Chin should want the pelt for the same purpose? He wondered, speculatively, what sort of a husband the apelike Quinn would make; then laughed at his own conceit.

Idona met him at the door with a smile. And in his delight at seeing her, he did not notice that her eyes were troubled. From the room beyond came the drone of voices, punctuated now and then by a booming laugh and the clink of glasses.

To his look of inquiry Idona said in a low tone:

"A man papa used to know before he came here—a big, unmannerly brute with the eyes of a wolf. He had dinner with us, and once or twice I caught papa eying him as if he was afraid of him. Quinn, his name is."

Quinn! The man with the blue chin! Nap fought down the impulse to tell Idona of the incident at the fur trader's; the present of the "silver" was to be a surprise that would be better for the waiting.

"I met him at Mac's," he said lightly. "Of the lumber woods, I take it, and a lumber camp is not a college of fine manners."

And as she laughed he popped an almond into her mouth; and in their hour of happiness they chattered and planned like the lovesick children they were.

Nap was kissing her good-by for the fortieth time, when the door suddenly opened and in the doorway loomed the bulk of big Lew Quinn.

II.

UNDER the stimulus of the alcoholic "split," Quinn's cheeks had paled, accentuating the blue of his chin, and the porcine eyes were shot with flecks of blood. At sight of Toon he stiffened, and a sibilant hiss issued from his throat like that of a spitting lizard.

"Hah! So? It is my friend, the silver fox. So this is the sheik o' the Cuperlax, eh? Well, as I said before, Pierre, it's up to you. Now is as good time as any; go ahead and tell 'im."

"*Mais, m'sieu'*—" stuttered Pierre.

"No buts about it. Ye hearn what I said, an' ye'll go through with your end, or—" he paused significantly. "As for you, Silver, I gotta sportin' proposition. Since two grand, cash money, don't tempt ye to sell the pelt, I'll fight or gamble ye for it. If I win, gimme an order on Mac and cl'ar out and stay out. If I lose, the two grand is yourn, free gratis for nothin'."

"And *you* clear out."

Quinn scratched his blue chin and pursed his bulbous lips.

"Well, now, that's 'nother matter. My losin' don't figger, 'cause I don't figger to lose. Fact is, I've sorta planned to marry and settle down here near my old friend Pierre. Me and him's had a powwow, and we've agreed to agree. Eh, Pete?"

Idona cast a hasty glance toward her father, who, with quivering chin and half raised arms, had tried to catch the big man's eye. Now his arms dropped listlessly and he turned away.

In the gesture, in Quinn's half veiled words that reflected satisfaction and triumph, the lovers sensed the situation. The girl whom Quinn hoped to marry was Idona—and Pierre, through some mysterious force that Quinn exercised over him, had given his consent.

"No, no, no," Idona's voice rose in vehement protest as she raced to her father's side. "Say no, papa—no!"

Pierre spread his palms in an expressive gesture of helplessness, and in his watery eyes lurked an inward fear as Quinn darted him a look that was pregnant with meaning.

"Pierre," cried Toon, "ye don't mean—"

But La Forge nodded dumbly, while a wolfish grin smeared Quinn's features. A sob rasped from the girl's throat as she clutched her father's arms and sought his face questioningly.

What she read there roused into a hot flame the fire of her aboriginal ancestors, and when she turned to face Quinn she reminded Nap of a trapped loup-cervier at bay.

Slowly she crossed the puncheon floor to confront the burly Quinn, and her movements were smooth, sinuous, catlike. Her eyes were hidden points of flame and her hands surreptitiously explored the folds of her skirt, where, both her father and Nap knew, reposed a keen blade; for Idona was a product of the wild.

The rose of her cheek deepened, and in her suppressed passion her rounded bosom rose and fell. To Nap Toon, to whom courage was a fetish, she was the personification of an aroused dryad, fighting for her love and her honor.

Even Quinn could not repress an exclamation of admiration.

"Gad," he breathed, "what a gal!"

"Yo' beas'," sibilated Idona, "firs' I would marry wit' th' black bear, 'fore I would marry wit' yo'. Yo' *gros cochon!* Faugh, yo' stink!"

The supreme contempt she threw into her words cut Quinn's sensitiveness like a whiplash. His code drew no fine distinctions of sex, for brute force was his god, and a thing that defied him was a thing to be crushed.

His gnarled fist rose menacingly. "Why, ye damned she-cat—"

The sentence was never finished. Like a walking-beam, a straight arm punch, backed by a hundred and ninety pounds of muscle and sinew, landed on his cheek bone, and he toppled sidewise; he carried the deal table with him, and 'mid the splintered glass of a green-shaded lamp he crumpled to the floor.

Before he could rise, Idona had glided to his side, keen blade held aloft. Through her clenched teeth she gritted: "I got it good mind—"

"'Dona, *arreté,*" shrieked Pierre.

"No, 'Dona, not that," said Nap gently. "Let him up."

Her eyes burning her hatred, the girl sheathed the gleaming blade, and not until then did Quinn get to his feet. He wiped his cheek with a dingy ban-

danna and caressed the rapidly growing "mouse" gingerly.

"Huh," he grunted, "like father, like darter, eh? Killin' must be in the blood."

Toon saw a spasm of pain and fear pass over the wizen features of Pierre as Quinn's gaze included him and the girl. Clearly, Blue Chin had something on the Canadian, and held it as an ugly club over his head. And as a price for his silence he had demanded the hand of Idona, and Pierre was forced to yield.

But what? Pierre was a peaceable man, self-effacing, though quick to anger.

"Cut that," growled Toon. "'Twould have sarved ye right if she had prodded yer yaller gizzard a little. Ye had it comin', plenty. Now, here. You made me a proposition awhile ago, and I'll take ye up on it. Ye offered to buy, gamble, or fight. We'll fight, rough and tumble; my 'silver' ag'in' your poke; loser to 'break' the region and never come back. Agreed?"

Quinn's lips drew back in an ugly snarl. "All right, Mr. Injun, we'll fight; my poke ag'in' your 'silver.' But it ain't goin' to be no rough and tumble, me high buck. We'll fight, lashed belt to belt, with knives."

"Knives?" gasped Nap Toon. "Good night!"

"No, no, Nap, not knife, pleas'," cried Idona. "Yo' might get hurt."

"Ye're crazy, Quinn. One of us would be sure to get killed, and t'other would get life in prison. There's a law ag'in' that, even here in the woods."

"Yah! Yer using the law and a woman's petticoat for an alibi, when really it's the yaller in yer Injun makeup croppin' out. Now, that's my ultimater, knives it is. The region hereabout is too small to hold you and me, for Pierre says he's gin his consent for you to marry his darter; he's likewise gin it to me, and I mean to hold him to it, or send him to the hoosegow. Fer's the gal is concerned, she ain't o' age yet, and she's got to do as her father says."

"Yeah?" throated Idona.

The inflection she threw into the word was contemptuously defiant, as again she glided across the room. A pace away, she halted, and with her hands resting lightly on her hips, her head cocked insouciantly, she slowly surveyed "Blue" Quinn from his shoe pacs to the unruly cowlick on his forehead; then the corners of her mouth began to wrinkle, her lips parted, and a laugh bubbled from her throat; an exasperating laugh that expressed amused contempt, derision.

"So my father give his consent to yo', huh? An' how 'bout me? Am I cow, to be barter back an' forth? Remember, *mon père,* I will be eighteen year of old affer Thanksgiving. I am woman, now; not child. I have always mind yo', always; but yo' must not try for change it beat of my heart, papa. Mebbe yo' are drink too much *vin blanc,* when yo' say dis man can marry wit' me, hm-m?"

But La Forge, torn by conflicting emotions, could only stare from one to the other. His attitude, weak, subservient, again fired the girl's wrath.

She followed up her stand by flinging open the door.

"Get out!" she ordered.

"And git quick," growled Toon.

But Quinn stood his ground.

"I guess I'll stay till Pierre backs up yer talk. This is his house an'—"

A lean hand caught him by the shirt and whirled him through the door, and he crashed through the rustic railing to sprawl on all fours. A moccasined foot knocked the knife he had drawn from his hand, and the next instant Toon had dropped astride his back. The Indian's legs whipped across his middle and locked with a force that squeezed the breath from his body, even as his head was forced down to allow a better grip for the half nelson, and with a sidelong heave he was

turned on his back, where he kicked and clawed like a helpless turtle.

The gyve across his ribs tightened, and, horror-struck, he saw the Indian's free hand close over the haft of his own knife, then, helpless to defend himself, he felt the sharp point break the skin just over his jugular.

"Quit it," he wheezed with bulging eyes, "I squeal."

"Will yer vamose?"

"Yes, yes."

"And never come back?"

"No! Lemme up!"

"All right."

None too gently the big trapper yanked him to his feet, and his voice was potent with meaning as he said:

"Ye've got an hour to buy a wangin and git. As ye said a minute ago, this region is too small to hold you and me, and if I ever come across yer trail, hell and high water ain't goin' to keep me off'n it till I run ye inter the ground."

Quinn said nothing, but his eyes shone malignantly, and as he chafed his hog-like neck, he muttered:

"That goes double, Injun. Lew Quinn ain't bruk so easy as this. Jest now yer top hand, but it's a bum deadfall as won't ketch two kinds of a skunk, ye dam' tricky son o' Squanto."

Less than an hour later, a heavy knapsack on his back, he swung into the old tote road that led downstream. At the edge of the wood he turned and shook a hairy fist at a stalwart figure that had watched his every move since he had left Pierre's; while there spewed from his bulbous lips a stream of anathema. Then the wood swallowed him up; a sinister incarnation of aroused hatred that would be fed and magnified by the lonely wastes and continued brooding, until it had grown into a festering sore in his brain.

III.

A WEEK later, Nap Toon spotted out a thirty-mile trap line on the Upper Cuperlax and proceeded to build a new camp. He labored hard and long, and as he labored he sang. Not the deep booming songs of trail and trap, but soft crooning songs of love, for he envisioned a home.

The days of Indian summer, merged into the crisp October nights, and Toon set out a few snares. Since the real trapping season had not begun, he was in no particular hurry; peltry would prime late and "blue" skins were almost valueless.

But as he poled against the current, and paddled across the deadwaters of the Cuperlax, as he trudged over ridges and hogbacks, or dipped into the swales and swamps along his spotted trail, he was assailed with a vague, instinctive feeling that he was being watched; that unseen, inimical eyes peered at him from the *boscage* and boles.

He took to glancing behind him; even took short excursions beside the trail in an attempt to locate something tangible, with no result. Once he thought he glimpsed a shadow, and with an Indian imprecation he lunged the canoe ashore, caught up his rifle and searched the bank for half a mile.

Save for a squirrel that scolded him from a near-by tree, there was no sign of living thing.

"Huh! No wonder the squirrels chatter at me; they think I'm nuts; but I'd have sworn—hell!" He shook his head.

Again and again he investigated a hunch, and each time he met with nothing more than a prowling hedgehog or a whirring partridge.

He tried to dismiss the feeling; to laugh it off; yet it persisted in obtruding, and in the following weeks his boyish spontaneiety gave way to an irritable brooding. A trailing root that tripped, or a limb that flicked his face, was sufficient to send him into a quick, unaccountable anger, for which he was afterward ashamed.

By the first of November he had completed his trap line. His water sets

were well placed, and the ridges, hogbacks and swamps were dotted with figure fours and deadfalls, as well as cubbies and dens; for Toon combined the primitive methods of his fathers with the modern school of steel jaws and manufactured scent; and signs indicated a bumper season.

The tang of frost was in the air one day when, delayed by a tripped deadfall, he decided to camp at a lean-to shelter on Cuperlax Falls, rather than brave the dreaded white water of the "Horserace," where a slight miscalculation meant swamping and the loss of his rifle and canoe. While waiting for his black kettle to come to a boil for his *pouchong,* he set his pan of bacon and venison on the birch griddle over the fire and proceeded to spread his blanket.

Evidently some one had camped there recently, for the bed was piled high with fir boughs, and it looked so inviting that he couldn't resist the temptation to stretch out for a moment. No sooner did his head touch the raised pile of bough tips that answered for a pillow than there was an ominous click, and he felt his head caught just in front of the ears.

With a startled yell he fought to a sitting position, to be brought up short by an eight-foot chain. Even before he looked around he knew what had happened—he was caught in a bear trap!

A No. 5 Newhouse, he judged, by the size of the spring that jutted above his head like a grotesque horn; a steel machine that would defy the strength and weight of a full-grown bear. But for the thick folds of his blanket and the mink skin cap he wore, the snap of the double springs might have crushed his skull.

With all his strength he tried to spread the jaws apart, but even before he tried it he knew how futile the effort would be. He had set too many No. 5's not to know the tremendous strength executed by those great springs of tested steel. He'd need a skid lever, the use of both hands and his weight to release those jaws. The situation was desperate for a lone man in the woods.

He stifled the moan that rose to his lips and closed his eyes against the pain, then frantically he clawed away the boughs to find that the heavy chain was fastened to a tree root by a three-eighths staple. Evidently set by some fool amateur. An experienced trapper would have used a clog. Damn fool!

He tore away the flimsy sides of the rude shelter the better to reach the staple, then wound the chain around his arm, and with his wrists, jacked by the leverage of his knees, he strained and yanked until black spots floated before his eyes, then lay back panting from the exertion and pain. A dozen ways and means of escape flitted through his mind to be discarded because he had no adequate means of putting them in operation.

He remembered that once he had seen a strong man in a circus break a chain by folding the links and twisting them apart. He tried this, but it was no go. Hell!

If he could only reach his ax—but his ax, knife, tumpline, gun, buckskin shirt and knapsack lay on the other side of the fire. With his belt he made a loop on the end of the longest pole of his lean-to frame and tried to hook it over the handle of his ax, and only succeeded in knocking the ax behind the stump, out of sight and hopelessly beyond reach.

In his anger and disappointment he fought the diabolic jaws for ten minutes with a strength born of despair, unmindful of the sticky, crimson stream that flowed from his lacerated scalp. No use! In his excitement he shouted at the top of his voice, then grinned sheepishly.

The Upper Cuperlax was off the beaten trail of the main river; the settlement was forty miles away, and the nearest trapper's cabin lay over Big

Hogback, fifteen miles to the westward.

He could expect no help. The thought lent wings to his desperation, and again he attacked his prison, the while he swore strange garbled oaths and called on the gods of fate to loose him that he might track down the fool who unwittingly had been instrumental in bringing upon him this living hell.

His supper of deer meat had long since burned to cinders, and the heat had melted off the spout of his teapot, and he remembered that he was hungry. Unconsciously he fumbled for his pipe to smoke, as he often did when hungry—but the pipe reposed in the pocket of his buckskin that lay at the foot of a hackmatack. Oh, well!

Already the shadows of night shrouded the wood, and the crisp November air bit at the exposed portions of his body. He threw a handful of boughs on the fire, only to be deluged by the thick fog of smoke that caused him to strangle and choke.

Dully he watched through red-rimmed lids the licking flames consume the limbs. A balsam bulb exploded with a little pop, and in the ensuing flare of flaming pitch he thought he saw the luminous eyes of Idona.

Idona! Vividly she rose from the flames, sinuous, lithe, alluring. And she had promised to wait for him; while his bones lay here to bleach, toll to the wild.

By Heaven! No! His efforts to free himself in the next twenty minutes bordered on frenzy. And as he worried at his clanking prison, he snarled, whined and spat at it, for all the world like one of the many beasts he himself had trapped. At last, bathed in sweat and covered with blood, his struggles became weaker and, all at once, he began to laugh.

Funny! Caught in a bear trap! What a joke to relate around the pot-bellied stoves of trading posts!

He, Nap Toon, who had been bringing in the best catch of fur, winter after winter, caught in a bear trap! Again he laughed, then checked himself; this wouldn't do. He must keep his head, must remain cool.

Keep cool, that's the ticket. His temples pounded; his body ached, and his neck felt as if it was broken from the weight of the blanket and trap.

Oh, hum! Let's see, was it yesterday or the day before that he made camp here? Damn those flecks that floated before his eyes anyway. He fought off the dizziness with an effort.

Got to keep cool. Was that the roar of the falls that sounded in his ears? Gee, for a drink.

A snuffling hedgehog nosed his pack and nibbled at a cold flapjack. Toon shied a stick at the bold marauder, and as it shuffled off he wished that it hadn't gone and would come back.

Br-r; getting cold, wasn't it? He threw another handful of boughs on the fire and again he coughed and wheezed as the smoke clogged his lungs. The throbbing at his temples had developed into a steady ache; the steel jaws seemed to be eating their way into his brain; while the gnawing void at the pit of his stomach grew into a ball of pain.

Drowsily he tried to fight off the lethargy that assailed him, but gradually his resistance grew weaker and he sank into a semicoma.

All night he lay, groaning, muttering incoherently like a man in the throes of nightmare. With the dawn came consciousness.

Frost covered the ground and he lapped the frozen dew and chewed leaves to assuage his thirst. His flannel shirt was inadequate, and he shivered as with ague, and he reached for a match to kindle a fire, to remember that his match box was with his pipe.

Again he tried to fish for them with a pole, only to push them away farther.

Great Jehovah, was he to die like this? To starve? A raving maniac?

"Ten thousand demons! No! No!" he shrieked aloud.

The sound of his voice sobered him. Must keep cool! To give way to his thoughts would hasten delirium and—

What was that? An answering hello? Couldn't be; it was the echo of his own cry, or his ears were playing him tricks. Still—"

He sat up and raised his voice again. Above the dull roar of the falls, his shout echoed and reëchoed mockingly as he listened, tense, trembling, with anxiety. There was no answer.

This, then, was the edge of sanity—he was going crazy. Ha, listen! Faintly against the wind came an answering cry, and again he shouted, his voice quavering with a note of hysteria.

IV.

Five minutes later, in response to his guiding cries, there came a crackling of the underbrush; the bushes parted and framed the coarse features of Lew Quinn, his blue chin hidden under a frowzy black beard. Of all the men in the world, thought Toon, it had to be an enemy to find him thus. But this was no time for petty animosities.

"Thank God you came, Quinn," he panted. "Get this damn thing off, will you? Been here since sundown last night, and I'm about all in."

Deliberately, Quinn sized up the situation; noted the great trap that stuck grotesquely from the Indian's head; noted the pain-drawn, blood smeared features; the wild light that shone in the inflamed eyes; then a cruel grin spread over his face.

"Can't ye loose it?" he chuckled, as he rid himself of his knapsack in a businesslike manner.

"If I could have, I wouldn't be here," answered Toon. "Better first chop out that staple that some damn fool drove chucko into that root, then get a skid for a lever."

"Hold yer hosses, now," grinned Quinn. "That ain't the fust b'ar trap I've saw, though 'tis the fust time I've saw it ketch a critter by the head. I'll git ye out all in good time if ye'll keep yer gab-trap klinked. Jest lemme 'lone."

"All right. Le's not argue, only for God's sake, hurry."

Now that relief was at hand the Quoddy's reserve was fast slipping. Quinn caught up his belt hatchet and disappeared in the woods, while Toon adjusted his position so that the coming skid would get the best leverage.

But what was his surprise to see that instead of a lever, Quinn had brought an armful of wood, and humming tunelessly, proceeded to build a fire.

Though disappointed, Toon refrained from saying anything for fear of arousing the other's anger; probably he was going to heat some water to bathe his wounds. Of their differences he did not think; they were submerged by the present situation and Quinn would release him shortly.

"Had breakfast?" grunted Quinn.

"No."

"Thought ye moughtn't. I'll fix up a bannock."

"T' hell with the bannock!" flared Nap. "Get me out of this first."

"By'm'by, kiddo. Don't get peevish." Quinn was in excellent humor.

"Peevish? Good God, do you think that a man thinks of breakfast when he's caught like this?"

"Sure! Why not?" grinned Quinn. "Gotta eat if ye'r gonna live, ain't ye? Bet yer belly thinks that yer gullet's bruk off an'—haw, haw!"

His chuckle developed into open merriment.

"Cripes, ye sure look funny settin' thar! Some'at like a pitchur o' them old Injun chiefs wropped in blankets and a funny headdress on. Haw, haw! Wonder what the gal will say when I tell her that I found ye caught in yer own b'ar trap? That yer last words were for her, and that me and you had buried the tommyhawk, arter I'd nussed ye, a-tryin' to bring ye through, for her sake, and that for my trouble

in stickin' by ye, that ye'd willed the 'silver' to me and her, for a weddin' present. Hm'm!"

Toon's eyes widened in growing horror as in the harsh cachinnation that emanated from the bulbous lips, he sensed the mind of a madman; a fiend incarnate that would laugh at a fellow being under such conditions.

"You—you blue-chinned devil," he cried, "you set that trap!"

Quinn nodded and grinned complacently.

"And I'll tell the cock-eyed world that it was some set, too. It was me as tripped that deadfall at the head o' Gull Pond, so's ye'd be too late to run the Hossrace afore dark, and I figgered ye to camp here or at Doghole Logan, where I had 'nother sweet surprise waitin' for ye. I've been watchin' of ye, off 'n' on, for nigh two months, studyin' how best to snag ye. It was only a matter of time, anyway, afore I stuck the harpoon into ye and twisted it. And last night ye were hooked. Haw, haw! Lor', how ye kicked and squished around!"

So! Toon's teeth clicked and though the blood coursed through his veins like the troubled waters of a spring freshet, by a supreme effort he fought down the impulse to try to reach that sneering face; fought down the primitive rage that welled within him to strip that hide of his into shreds. Instead he masked his feelings beneath that emotionless exterior with which an Indian is blessed—or cursed—and regarded Quinn soberly.

That a man could watch even a wild beast suffer like this was more than he could understand. And this fiend had watched him since last night—had probably slept tranquilly, while he writhed and tossed in agony. God! He couldn't be human!

If he'd only come near enough—if he could only reach that belt hatchet stuck in a tree scarcely six feet away! There was murder in his own heart right then.

His brain afire with a thousand thoughts, the muffled drone of Quinn's voice, triumphant, gloating, drummed in his ears.

"So ye thought ye'd bruk me, huh? Thought I'd forget a sock in the mush and the tickle of a shiv ag'in' my jugular?" His voice rose shrilly. "Why, damn yer pelt, I'll never forget it! And afore I'm through with ye, ye'll wish ye'd never crossed Lew Quinn or seen the cat as is the cause o' yer bein' in this jam.

"Then arter ye've gone to join ol' Sittin' Bull and other 'good' Injuns in hell, I'll go out and cop the gal. I'll tame her, leave it to me. The fust time she pulls any o' that hoity-toity stuff on me agin I'll carve my initials on her back with a dogwhip. Laffed at me! 'S if I, a white man, wa'n't good 'nuff for her. Damn she-cat!"

"Her father would kill you," flared Toon.

"Aw, be yerself! I've got that Canuck so buffaloed that he'd tuck his tail atween his yaller legs and scoot like a fox if I said 'boo.' I've bluffed that pea souper into believin' that he croaked ol' Win Partheu in a knife fight on the Restigouche, twenty year ago.

"Haw, haw! Since I know ye can keep a secret now, I don't mind tellin' ye that it was *my* sticker as sent ol' Win to the hospital and left him a cripple. The 'blue nose'—Scotian—had discharged me from his lumber camp awhile afore that, and it was my little way o' gittin' hunk. Oh, I'm a playful cuss, once I unsheath my claws. Witness yerself. 'Nother time, I—"

Just then the kettle boiled over and Toon was left to his thoughts. While humming a tuneless ditty, Quinn threw together a bannock and sliced up the rest of the Quoddy's deer steak. The aroma of coffee, frying bacon and wild meat fanned the Indian's hunger into a famished longing, but he swore that he'd see Quinn scorching on a griddle in Hades before he'd ask for a crumb.

Out of the corner of his eyes, Quinn watched the imprisoned man, as he squatted on his hunkers and ate with gluttonous relish. He wolfed the meat from the fry pan and guzzled the coffee from the spout of the steaming pot, and having eaten his fill, he gave a satisfied grunt, then unceremoniously dumped the remainder into the coals.

"Oh, shucks," he cried with well-simulated regret, "that's too bad. I clean forgot ye. Ye see, I bin so used to eatin' alone and dumpin' what was left for so long, that it's got to be a habit. That meat was tarnal good, too; tender's a chicken."

Toon said nothing, but in the Stygian depths of his eyes glowed an unholy light, and his body flushed with anger. If Quinn would only come near enough—

Quinn snagged off a generous hunk of tobacco and rolled the weed into his capacious cheek, where it bulged like that of a chipmunk's pouch. And as if not content with that, he proceeded to fill a villainous-looking "bulldog" with black shag.

Tobacco is almost a necessity with some men, and Toon scarcely knew which he desired more, food or a good smoke. He was suffering keenly, now, and those spots had come back to play their fantastic tricks before his eyes.

Quinn swabbed out his fry pan with a bough and set it on the fire to soften the grease, when it slid off on the near side; and Toon gathered his muscles. Still humming, cheek bulging, the pipe stem clenched between his teeth, Quinn stepped around the fireplace to retrieve the spider, when the Indian's muscular leg swung out and his moccasined foot almost buried itself in Quinn's paunch.

"Oo-agh!" he grunted as he folded up.

Like a madman, Toon flung himself to the length of his tether in an attempt to follow up his advantage, but in his agony Quinn had rolled just out of reach. Nap caught up one of the shelter poles and struck, but it was rotten, and before he could find a stronger one, Quinn had realized his danger and scrambled out of the way.

With his hands pressing against his stomach, his breath coming in sobbing gasps, Quinn gagged on the cud that the sudden blow had caused him to swallow. Long he lay there, regaining his breath, then he went into a paroxysm of nausea.

Suddenly he leaped to his feet and caught up his rifle. Through a haze, his head swimming, Toon saw the swinish eyes gleam wickedly, saw the dingy finger slowly crook the trigger—then came a blanket of merciful blackness.

V.

WHEN he came to, he lay as he had fallen. Quinn sat on the other side of the fire, holding his shaggy head with his palms.

Blue Chin had been a mighty sick man during the twenty-minute interval. He turned a sickly countenance toward the Quoddy, as Toon groaned and sat up.

"Come to, have ye? Well, I ain't kiddin' ye when I say that that came dam' near bein' yer last snooze. Ye cert'nly had my goat for a minute. But since I've had time to git my wind back, I gotta admit that I'd 'a' done the same thing, if I was you and you was me. Sure would. But shootin' would 'a' put ye out o' yer misery too soon. Dod rot yer pelt, interest on that kick is goin' to be heavy, and I don't mean perhaps."

Toon eyed his tormentor for a moment, then there spewed from his bruised lips a torrent of abuse. He called Quinn everything, and likened him to every despicable animal he could think of; he reviled his ancestors, and ended by calling on the Deity to condemn to eternal perdition the future generations of Quinn.

His voice rose and fell in his denunciation, and he threw every bit of barbed contempt, venom and scorn into

his words that he could, in an attempt to goad Quinn to attack or shoot him, to end the exquisite torture he was enduring. But Quinn merely cocked his head to one side and even nodded encouragingly when Toon ran out of breath.

"Putty good," he commended. "Ye got in a few as I ain't never heard before. I'd enj'yed it better if my stummick wa'n't so upsot. Gin us some more."

A growl sounded deep in the Quoddy's throat, and in his desperation he lunged forward, only to be brought up short by the chain. With berserker fury he attacked the chain and trap, even to bite at it until his lips dripped with blood, and his wounds bled afresh.

For five minutes he raged and threshed about, while Quinn looked on in silent approval.

"Damned if ye ain't tougher than a bull moose. Cripes, that head o' yourn must be o' solid horn. Ain't many men as could stand up under what you've bin through the past twelve, fifteen hours, 'thout goin' batty. You sure are rugged."

Meet praise indeed, considering its source, but Toon scarcely heard it; for the strain had been too much, and he lay in a stupor. The intermittent roaring in his ears had increased to a steady rumble; a thousand little devils stabbed tridents into his brain, and his temples pounded as if a gigantic pump was forcing the blood through his veins.

Grim, stoically, he endured the pain, stifling the groans that welled from his chest, steeling himself against the inevitable. He swore by his scapula that Quinn could gouge out his eyes and he would never cry quarter.

Dimly there flitted through his fevered brain a recollection that he had been caught thus before. But where? When? Then he was flooded by another merciful blank; and only his stertorous breathing, broken by incoherent muttering, indicated that he was clinging tenaciously to life.

And on the other side of the fire hovered Quinn like a huge buzzard, watching, waiting to complete his ghoulish work.

The Indian awoke to reason; clearly, lucidly the events of the past few hours unreeled before his mind. Through half-lidded eyes he watched Quinn, and a crafty gleam replaced the maniacal glare of a few minutes before. He groaned.

"Hello, back again, eh? Ye was out so long that I'd begun to think ye was gittin' ready to pass out. Now, look, it is time me and you come to sort o' a understandin', and I hope ye ain't so spifflicated that ye don't git my drift. Without my help ye ain't got the chance o' a hamstrung rabbit in a nest o' lucivees o' gittin' out o' this jam. Ye had it comin', plenty, for ye raked me putty hard, manhandlin' o' me and tryin' to 'break' me that-away, back at the Landin', but I've got a change o' heart watchin' of ye layin' thar.

"Now, look; you give me an order on Mac, together with the receipt for that silver fox; promise to dig out o' the region acrost the boundary into Canady and leave Idona to think ye are dead; and I'll loose ye. Thrun down the proposition and I'll leave yer bones to be picked by the moosebirds, and later I'll git what I want anyway. What say?"

Toon shook his head to clear away those damnable spots that had come back, and Quinn misunderstood.

"No?" he cried unbelievingly. "Well, ye damn fool! Here I gin ye a show for yer white alley and ye thrun it down. Of all the dawgone fools I ever see, ye take fust prize! All right," he snarled, "then lay there and rot, ye bullheaded— Hey, what ye doin'?"

Toon was fumbling weakly at his pocket to extract a folded paper and popped it into his mouth, and in the move Quinn saw his chance of possessing the beautiful "silver" go with it. He wanted that receipt.

"Spit out that receip', ye danged billygoat!"

Recklessly he sprang upon the entrapped Quoddy and reached for the sinewy throat, when Toon's weakness suddenly vanished. With a growl like that of a wild beast, he drew Quinn down.

The long legs, hardened by thirty-mile hikes, whipped across Quinn's body and he locked them into his favorite "scissors," with a satisfied grunt. Quinn remembered the crushing force of those deadly legs, and threw his arms back to break the hold, only to feel the arm caught in a snappy hammerlock that brought a strained groan as he thought his shoulder was being torn from its socket.

Toon exerted every ounce of his reserve power into his hold; the strength born of desperation; of a man who faced the grim specter. But, by the gods, this human devil would go with him!

Great wheezing grunts accompanied Quinn's desperate attempts to squirm free; he kicked, clawed and bit, but grim and implacable as the steel jaws that gripped his enemy, the clamping legs held. There was a dull snap and a shaft of pain stabbed his side; then came a stunning blow as Toon brought the protruding end of the trap down on the back of his head, again and again.

There was a sound in his ears like empty wagons passing over a wooden bridge, his eyes bulged and his lungs felt as if they were filled with hot smoke and he was drifting away on a billowy cloud, drifting—drifting—

VI.

THAT evening while Idona cleared up the supper dishes, Pierre La Forge was amusing himself by playing an old Canadian *chanson d'amour* on his fiddle, when there came a sound as of some huge animal crawling on his porch. Rifle in hand, he opened the door to confront a swaying figure, that caused him to start back in alarm. It was Nap Toon!

His face was a mass of dried blood, into which spills and leaves had caked and gave him a grotesque appearance; but what almost caused the temperamental Canadian to swoon was the trap that hung to the back of his head padded by a blood-smeared blanket, the chain clanking on the puncheon floor as he staggered to a chair.

"Grub," croaked the apparition.

White-faced and trembling, Idona gazed at her affianced for a moment, then clapped her hands to her face to shut out the sight. But only while she gathered her wits, then she became a dynamo of action.

Hot water, towels, shears, bandages and unguent, appeared as if by magic, and under her deft fingers Toon was bandaged until he looked like an Arabian sheik.

And while they worked over him, Nap talked. In broken sentences, he explained how he had succeeded in snaring Quinn's belt hatchet, cutting out the staple and dragging himself to his canoe. How he ever ran the swift waters of the Horserace without swamping, he never knew. He had a faint recollection of shooting through the rapids, laughing and yelling wildly.

Eagerly he gulped at the bowl of partridge broth, thickened with gruel, then with a hoglike grunt, he slumped to the floor exhausted.

For three days he raved, and in his delirium, he fought and refought those terrible hours at Cuperlax Falls; while the faithful Idona hovered over his bedside like a mother watching a fevered child.

And they had cause for thankfulness on Thanksgiving, for Idona celebrated her birthday by having the padre slip a band of gold on her finger, while draped across her shapely shoulders was a beautiful scarf made from the pelt of a silver fox.

THE END

Red Hot

By FRED MacISAAC

Author of "Coast of Blue," "Desperate Chances," etc.

In which the author shows that you'll have an exciting time if you try to keep a good man down

WHAT HAS OCCURRED IN PARTS I and II

LESTER LUCUS opens a "hot-dog" stand after being fired from an office job. He does so well that a formerly rich college classmate, "Chipmunk" Arthur Colter, puts half his remaining money into the business, and Francesca and Hilda, the daughters of Ludwig Brinker, the "sausage king," buy a small interest in the business as a joke on their father, who hates to have his Comet Brand superfrankfurters called "hot dogs." Mr. Brinker is so sore that he has the police make Lester change his business slogan, and stops the sale of his fine product to Lester. Half-disheartened, Chipmunk starts uptown to see the Brinker girls. While Lester is closing up shop, and thinking of visiting Nora Meagher, a quick-witted friend of his, a man comes in to talk to him, whom an old bum named Walter Downing, whom Lester had twice befriended, declares is one of a quartet of crooks who once beat Downing up.

CHAPTER XII.

NORA COMES DOWN TOWN.

IT happened that Lester Lucus had not called upon Nora Meagher since the evening when he encountered Randolph Milligan in her apartment. He had intended to make a return visit, but what with one thing or another—the arrangements with Arthur Colter, for example—he hadn't managed to get uptown.

People who live upon the northern fringe of New York are almost out of the world, in the opinion of the lazy residents of the city proper. They tell of two brothers who had not seen each other for thirty years because one lived at Washington Heights and the other in Flatbush.

Lots of working girls whose home is in remote suburbs walk out on their parents, on the ground that no man will ever come to see them, and take a furnished room in the congested district so as to be a convenient drop for the spoiled youths who are potential husbands.

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for April 14

And this New York inertia is in the face of the swiftest and cheapest transportation system in the world.

However, Les was faced with a problem, and he found himself yearning for the counsel and sympathy of somebody who looked so much like Nora Meagher that it couldn't be anybody else.

During his seven years of shuttlecocking from one business enterprise to another he had picked up a certain amount of commercial wisdom. He was aware that most men go broke through inability to let go of a losing proposition.

If a merchant opened up and transacted no business for a few weeks or a month, he would shut up shop, charge off his investment, and try something else; but if a certain amount of trade came his way, leaving him with a small weekly deficit, he would be encouraged to carry on indefinitely, expecting always that business would develop out of the red ink and into the black.

And statistics show that this tantalizing trick of fate is responsible for the loss of the life's savings of nine out of ten business men.

His little venture had started furiously, due in part to his location, though the Greek who had previously owned it had not found it a profitable site for a stand, and in part to his slogan, his megaphone methods, and to the fine quality of his goods.

He still had the location, but the slogan was proscribed, the Comet brand refused to him, and there was a sudden public aversion to frankfurter sandwiches.

The question was whether it would be wiser to shut up shop while he had his first week's profits, which more than covered his investment, or to carry on and meet a weekly deficit.

Chipmunk Colter was on his conscience. Colter was a babe in the woods who would make no protest if his twenty thousand dollars was frittered away in a losing business. Lester saw no sense in opening other stands while the newspapers were decrying "hot dogs."

He knew enough about newspapers to be aware that in a week they would be viewing something else with alarm, and he understood that the public had a very short memory; but, minus his slogan of "Red hot cops, Belgian police dogs," what were the chances of a string of frankfurter stands doing any more business than existing institutions of that sort, most of which were giving their owners a very meager living?

In the subway station he saw a telephone booth, and before he knew it he was dropping a nickel in the slot and giving the telephone number of Nora Meagher.

Her cool, sweet little voice answered immediately.

"This is Lester Lucus—"

"The frankfurter magnate," she laughed.

"Even so, exquisite. Would you be interested in a free dinner in delightful company?"

"The dinner interests me strangely, but who will provide the company you mention?"

"Lester Lucus, none other."

"Oh. I suppose you want me to come down town; most men do."

"W-ell."

"All right. I'll meet you in the Astor at seven o'clock."

"That's a girl," he approved. "Au revoir."

He found the Times Square hostelry full of young ladies who were so obliging as to come down town to dine, and a few of them looked as though they had come on speculation, for they threw coy glances at the brawny, red-headed young man who did not in the least suggest the proprietor of a frankfurter stand.

Nora was a few minutes late, and he saw her the instant she entered. She wore a big, floppy hat and a light dress

just as short as that worn by any other girl in the Peacock Alley, and it dawned on him that there was class to Nora.

"Let's eat here," he suggested. He had planned an Italian *table d'hôte,* but Nora looked as though she belonged under soft lights amid snowy napery. Those Brinker girls were worth millions, but this damsel made as effective an appearance as they even if she did tickle typewriter keys for a living.

The head waiter led them to a corner table, and Lester ordered a dinner which made Nora's eyes sparkle.

"Now tell me, how goes the great enterprise?" she demanded. "I have been reading in the newspapers that it is sinful to eat hot dogs. It looks like enemy propaganda."

"It raised the deuce with business during the past week. I'm in quite a predicament, Nora."

"Oh, this talk will blow over."

"Yes, but that's only part of it."

He told her the events of the past week, beginning with the incorporation and winding up with the visit of the headquarters man who had ordered the removal of the sign and placed a taboo on red-hot cops.

"I never heard such nonsense in my life," she declared. "I agree with this Chipmunk person that there is something back of the police interference. Somebody wants your location."

"It will just about ruin us," he sighed.

Nora buttered a morsel of bread and put it in her mouth.

"You have twenty thousand dollars capital," she reminded him.

"Yes, but I have no right to sink it."

"Why not? Everybody does. That is what capital is for."

"Darn it, I can't waste Arthur's money. It's all he's got."

The girl regarded him curiously.

"You have changed a lot. Are you the man who wrote those sales letters for Laguna-by-the-Sea?"

"That was different. Arthur is my friend. He trusts me. We went to college together."

"I have five hundred dollars," said Nora casually. "Want to sell me some stock in your company."

"I should say not."

"I think it would be a better investment than Laguna. I don't think your affairs are desperate, Les. Your slogan was a novelty and helped you attract attention, but your business is established now. People know you sell good stuff.

"Change your line of talk through your megaphone; just confine yourself to describing how delicious your sandwiches are, and you will continue to sell them.

"As soon as Mr. Colter is able to run the stand, you find a good location and open another one. As for those Comet sausages, Filkin's are just about as good. Those Brinker girls must be great fun."

"They are corkers," he agreed enthusiastically.

Nora looked wistful. "It must be wonderful to be like them. Not to have to scrimp and scrape to make a decent appearance. Not to have to bang a typewriter eight hours a day. I suppose their father gives them for pocket money two or three times what I earn."

"They don't look a bit better than you, Nora Creina," he assured her.

"That's all a man knows about it. With half a glance a woman would know that this dress cost eleven dollars; my hat, four; my shoes are samples, and my pearls came from the ten-cent store. Are they very pretty, Les? That blond one sounds charming."

"I'm going to have you meet them," he assured her.

Nora laughed, not an amused laugh. "I suppose they seem very democratic to you. They would turn to stone if you introduced them to me. Society girls and stenographers don't mix, Les."

"You're prettier and have more sense than both of them put together."

"Thanks; it's nice if you really think so."

Their eyes met. For the first time Les felt a thrill from a glance of a girl's eyes. These were so deep and dark and blue. Nora dropped her long black lashes over the disturbing azure pools.

"Then if you were I, you would open up and see if things improve minus what I assume to be the cause of my brief prosperity."

"Unless you would prefer to go back to a salary for selling lots in Laguna."

"It's like this, Nora: if there is a barrel of money in it, I can stand being a frankfurter vender, but I am not going to do it for a bare living. It's no better than being a waiter in a cheap restaurant. I am ashamed of myself all the time."

"Does your friend, Mr.—er—Chipmunk mind it?"

Les laughed. "It's burning him up. He ducked down behind the counter a couple of times this week when he saw people he knew passing."

Laugh wrinkles appeared at the corners of her eyes and her teeth flashed brilliantly.

"You poor kids," she said. "I know how you feel. Now, if you had not gone to college and hadn't been strutting around the business district looking like 'coming men,' you would not think anything of it.

"Yet you are better off than nine out of ten of the young fellows who look so swagger on lower Broadway. Your hundred-five dollars' profit this week is twice what most of them make. And you have twenty thousand dollars capital. That's a lot of money, Les."

"I'll say it is," he grinned.

"You could open quite a fine restaurant with that; only the town is full of restaurants, and you don't know anything about the business."

He shook his head.

"Toasting frankfurters is about our limit in the culinary line."

"The thing for you to do is to hold on to your capital and watch for a good opportunity. I don't suppose Mr. Chipmunk would refuse to use it in some other line. He isn't wedded to the hot-dog business."

"Another week like the last will kill him."

"I heard Mr. Davenport tell some one that ten thousand dollars cash is enough to swing a hundred-thousand-dollar deal any time," she said thoughtfully. "You know he only paid fifteen thousand dollars cash down for Laguna-by-the-Sea."

"He was stung at that."

"No, he wasn't. He paid one hundred and fifty thousand dollars for the land, subdivided it to sell for a million and a half, and he has already sold twenty-five thousand dollars' worth; enough to give him back his cash investment and pay off ten thousand dollars' worth of notes when they come due."

"Well, we can't take chances like that. By Jove!"

"What?"

Lester's eyes were shining.

"Twenty thousand dollars is a lot of money," he exclaimed. "It ought to swing a two-hundred-thousand-dollar deal. Nora, I'm going to form a hot-dog trust."

A peal of laughter did not daunt him.

"I mean it," he insisted. "With my business training, what a sap I've been not to see it! I'll organize all the frankfurter stands in down town New York. Some of them I can buy for a hundred dollars cash, some would want more, but I'll make them take cash and stock.

"I'll get a couple of hundred in the combine, then double prices. I'll be able to buy the material direct from the manufacturers in big quantities. Now is the time when they all think they are going to be ruined because of this newspaper talk."

Nora looked doubtful.

"I don't think you have money enough for that. Besides, there is nothing to prevent others from coming in and underselling you."

"Locations are everything. Give me a hundred busy corners, and I don't care who is operating in the side streets. I'll open an office and put Colter in charge of it; that will make him happy; install a stenographer—"

"Me," declared Nora. "I hate working for Davenport. I'll be your stenographer, and I'll keep my eye on Mr. Colter. That name Chipmunk makes him sound flighty."

"No-o," he hesitated. "We may blow up, and then you'll be out of a job."

"I can get another one. Good secretary-stenographers are scarce. Do you think you have enough money, Les?"

"Probably not, but I'll make it do."

"Do you think it's right to risk Mr. Colter's money?"

"He insists upon gambling it," Lester said grimly.

"I'll give my two weeks' notice Monday," she declared. "Maybe I can get away by next Saturday."

After dinner they went to a picture show, which Les did not watch because he was too busy with his great scheme. However, he enjoyed the sympathetic presence of Nora, who understood the cause of his abstraction and did not disturb him, and he insisted upon accompanying her all the way uptown, though she insisted she could easily go home alone on the subway.

Lester stayed awake most of the night considering ways and means. It seemed to him that the depression in the frankfurter business was direct assistance from Providence in view of his new plan, and he prayed that it would last another couple of weeks, long enough to discourage the independent merchants.

There were flaws in the plan, of course. Even with cash registers he did not know but that the venders would steal from the company, and the installation of cash registers in a few score of places would mean a heavy cash outlay.

There were, in the district, several quite elaborate, rather glorified hot-dog parlors, resplendent in red paint and operated by a corporation, but most of these were not well located, or so it seemed to him.

Some of the venders would immediately retire from business and he would need men to replace them, good men, honest men. However, the trust idea thrilled him, and he was confident he could overcome the difficulties.

He anticipated no trouble with Chipmunk. That chicken hatcher believed the moon was made of green cheese, that a hundred frankfurter stands ought to make two million dollars a year profit, and he would embrace the notion of a trust with wild enthusiasm.

Michael Arlen, before he obtained popularity in America, loved to jeer at us in a good natured manner. In one of his stories he declared that when an American said one ought to devote oneself to something "worth while," he meant "making money."

It is a fact that next to making love, making money is about the most interesting thing Americans and other human beings can think about, and next to making it ourselves we like to know how others make it.

Lester proposed to make it out of lowly "hot dogs," not by selling them, but by promoting a trust, and in his enthusiasm he overlooked the type of individual who is ordinarily engaged in the frankfurter vending business.

He found out Monday morning.

The depression in the trade continued Monday. During the regular rush hours of the forenoon Lester's siren song drew only ten or twelve dollars into the till. About ten thirty he determined to intrust the establishment to Arthur Colter.

"Don't be afraid to yell at likely

looking customers," he urged. "We have got to make a noise, now that our sign is down. I'm going to look for new locations."

As he had not yet confided to Chipmunk that he was to be a partner in a trust, Colter looked surprised..

"Got your nerve back, have you?" he grinned. "Thought you weren't going to do a thing for awhile?"

"I've got a big idea I'll tell you about later. Meanwhile it struck me that other venders are being hit as hard as we are by the depression, and now is the time to pick up their stands cheap."

"Go to it, old rooster," chortled Arthur. "We'll be rich yet."

Alone in the tiny establishment Chipmunk set a row of sausages sizzling on the griddle, picked up the megaphone, and pointed it at a pair of pretty girls, but the cowardly voice refused to function.

"Aw, Les will be back soon," he told himself. "I'm no lecturer."

A moment later a brisk looking young business man arrived before the counter.

"I'm looking for the proprietor, Mr. Lucus," he said.

"Sorry. He's on an errand. Anything I can do? I'm his partner."

The man smiled pleasantly. You are a queer looking pair to be in this sort of business. I've got news for him, rather bad, I expect."

"Shoot. We're used to bad news."

"I'm the agent of the building. You fellows are here on a month-to-month basis, no lease. Now we have an offer of one hundred and twenty-five dollars per month for the place. You've got to meet it if you want to stay on."

"Do we get a lease at that rent?"

"Perhaps a six-months' lease. Yes, I'll take a chance and give you a six-months' lease."

"All right. A hundred and twenty-five a month and a six-months' lease."

"Hadn't I better see Mr. Lucus?" The man hesitated.

"Suit yourself, but it 'll be all right. I'm his partner."

"It's a lot of money for a rathole like this. You don't seem to be doing much business."

"What do you care if we want to be saps?" demanded Chipmunk.

The agent laughed. "I feel like a holdup man, but I have an actual offer of one hundred and twenty dollars a month."

"Well, don't lift it on us again."

"You'll be safe for six months. What's this?"

The agent picked up a tiny ball of silvery substance which lay on the rim of the counter.

"Tinfoil, I guess, off a sausage box."

"No," said the man. It's metal. I don't know what it's doing here, but this is about two dollars' worth of platinum."

"It's not as big as a pea!" exclaimed Arthur incredulously.

"Save it. The owner may call for it. There's a platinum jeweler on the second floor of this building. That's how I recognized it."

"I would have brushed it off the counter in another minute. Much obliged," said Colter.

He put it in his vest pocket, then served a customer. Lester, he was thinking, would be wild when he heard that the rent had been jumped on them in addition to their other troubles, and might bawl him out for agreeing to the new terms, but in two weeks they would either be out of business or the stand would be worth keeping, and the rent day was a fortnight off. No papers had been signed; so they could back out if Lester decided it was the best plan. He dismissed it from his mind.

Wonder who's been putting platinum in our sausages. *Bing.* An idea.

In every hundredth sandwich put a valuable prize. Get a hot frankfurter and a lot on Long Island. No, too suggestive—might mean a grave—but a grand piano or a diamond ring. Say,

maybe he wasn't going to be entirely useless in the corporation, even if he couldn't operate the megaphone.

He took out the tiny bit of metal and scrutinized it. Imagine that thing being worth two dollars!

CHAPTER XIII.

MORE PRECIOUS THAN GOLD.

PLATINUM is a steel-gray, malleable metallic element which looks so much like silver that it takes faith to tell it from the latter. For example, if you see Mary Smith, the telephone operator, or Lizzie Jones, the shopgirl, wearing rings and bracelets of white metal you take it for granted that they are made out of silver, but if Mrs. Addington Pluttington appears at the opera upholstered in white metal you are sure that it must be platinum, because you have faith in Mrs. Pluttington; you know her husband is reeking with wealth.

On the other hand, if you see Miss Dottie Golightly, the footlight favorite, glittering with the stuff, why, you have to pray for guidance. Maybe Dottie has connections with a platinum mine, and maybe she is just silverplated.

Platinum made its bow modestly in the world, but when it was discovered that it was much more scarce than gold and could be used in jewelry as effectively, it suddenly became the most precious of all metals, and golden wedding rings went out about the time long skirts vanished into oblivion.

The firm of Gander & Gruen were manufacturers of platinum jewelry, and they occupied an office on the second floor of an old building on Broadway. It was a very curiously arranged office, much more curiously arranged than a casual visitor would imagine, but Gander & Gruen had to be very careful in view of the amazing value of the commodity in which they dealt.

If a man could walk out of Gander & Gruen's every day with his fingernails rimmed with platinum, he would be rich in no time, and it was the business of the partners to see that nobody did this.

An ounce is a very small measure of weight, and a twentieth part of an ounce, known in the trade as a pennyweight, is the next thing to nothing at all. A pennyweight of gold is only worth fifty-six cents, but a pennyweight of platinum is worth five dollars; so you see why these merchants had to be careful.

When you called on Gander & Gruen you did not push open the office door, you tried it and found it locked. Finally you found a push button and pushed it, whereupon, through a speaking tube, came a voice.

"Whom do you wish to see? And please state your business."

You picked up the speaking tube, which you had now discovered, and explained, and if the explanation was satisfactory, the door opened. You now found yourself in a space four feet square, the walls of which were steel from floor to ceiling broken only by two half-inch openings about five feet from the floor.

An unseen person scrutinized you by means of a periscope arrangement, then asked you, in a sepulchral tone, to go into details regarding your visit.

Having convinced him that you had come upon legitimate business, a door opened at the left, and you stepped into the outer office and stood before a long counter protected by a grill, which extended from floor to ceiling, while Mr. Gander, a brisk little man who had a chest like a pouter pigeon, condescended to tell you what you wanted to know.

The casual visitor departed thinking that things were rather queer in that place, but he did not learn how queer. The two tiny holes in the steel walls of the entrance hall, for example. These were covered by a square box, when seen from the inside, to which ran electric wires.

Inside each box was an automatic pistol trained to shoot a stream of bullets into the breast of anybody who entered the hallway. If the bullets from one of these pistols missed him, most likely those from the other weapon would not.

The pistols were operated by a push button, and Mr. Gander stood ready to press that button if he didn't like the face of the person who came in the front door. When you had a hundred pounds of platinum and a couple of hundred thousand dollars' worth of jewels in your safe all the time, you had to be prepared for every eventuality.

What the deuce, says the impatient reader, has all this stuff about platinum got to do with Lester Lucus and his hot-dog stand? Well, it happened that Gander & Gruen's offices were upon the second floor of the old building on Broadway near Fulton, and directly below them was the tiny shop of Lester and his new-found corporation.

The place for Gander & Gruen to be located, you would say, was in some new office building in quarters especially prepared for them, but it happened that they had been on this spot for forty years, and they made up for the antique character of the building by the adequacy of their arrangements, and they paid about a quarter as much rent as they would have done in a new structure.

Their safe was modern and perfectly fireproof as well as burglarproof. They had laid a floor of quarter-inch armor plate, and the walls and ceilings were protected in the same way, and they kept a watchman armed to the teeth in the offices night and day.

Two men worked at the benches in the front office, persons who had been with Gander & Gruen for a generation, yet these gentlemen changed all their clothes in the outer office, presented their naked bodies for inspection every noon and at night before donning their street clothes and wending their way homeward, and had been submitting to this indignity so long they thought nothing of it.

They were very highly paid workers in platinum, and they realized that dust which stuck to their overalls was immensely valuable.

Goldsmiths used to be the aristocrats of the mechanical trades, but platinum smiths are the crowned kings. Otto Lendburg, whose thick-lensed spectacles and long, brownish-white whiskers marked him in a crowd, was foreman of the shop.

He made as high as two hundred dollars a week, but his habits were simple, his tastes plain. Lately he had been getting his lunches downstairs at the stand where Lester Lucus sold Comet sausages and soft, fresh bread for twenty cents a sandwich.

Mr. Lendburg was of German birth and could eat sausages for lunch every day in the week without injuring his health. If he could have washed them down with a stein of dark beer instead of Mocha and Java he would have been entirely happy.

America was his home; under no consideration would he have been willing to return to Germany to live, but he did not approve of banning beer. He could have proved to you, if you were open to argument, that the small alcoholic content of beer was less injurious to the human system than the caffeine in the best coffee.

Every day, before going downstairs to lunch, Mr. Lendburg changed all his clothes so that no particles of platinum could be carried out of the establishment of Gander & Gruen. How, then, did the tiny ball of the precious metal happen to be lying upon the counter of Lester and Chipmunk's tiny café?

The answer is very simple. It fell out of his luxuriant white beard.

And on that particle of platinum a good deal of this story depends.

In the meantime Lester had gone cruising for despondent frankfurter venders in good locations. He found

one in a triangular space with only three feet frontage on Broadway, half a block above City Hall Park.

It was a dingy little layout, a dirty griddle, a rusty coffee tank, and an old tin box on the floor at the rear where the merchant kept his bread. The proprietor wore a greasy serge coat, was unshaven, and smoked a pipe. Upon the griddle reposed half a dozen thin frankfurters, the skin a bright pink, obviously the cheapest quality of artificially colored skins.

Lester had decided that he must open the ball strategically. He saw that the vender was an American—there would be no language difficulty—and, by his manner, rather hopeless.

"Good morning," he began breezily. "I'm representing Filkin sausages."

"Cost too much money," growled the man.

"How is business, may I ask?"

"Terrible, feller; terrible. Nobody ain't buying frankfurters any more. Only took in fifty cents so far to-day."

"My, my, if that keeps up you'll be out of business."

"Yep," said the man. "Rent day is day after to-morrow. Ain't got it."

Now a really keen business man would have digested this information and dropped the subject. In two or three days this location would be vacant, the proprietor departed; the place available for the rent money.

But Lester was sorry for the fellow, and he was going to need men to operate his string of establishments.

"How much do you make a week?" he asked.

"It ain't no business of yours if you do work for the Filkin people."

"There may be something in it for you to answer my questions."

"Well, that's different. I got about eighteen dollars last week, but this week I'll lose my shirt, only I ain't got a shirt."

"How would you like to make twenty-five dollars a week, clear, and nothing to worry about?"

"What doing?" demanded the man suspiciously.

"What you are doing now. Selling frankfurters."

"That would be all right."

"Suppose I give you fifty dollars cash; take over your place. Got a lease?"

"Yah. I got a lease. Forty a month, and ten months to run. You want to buy me out and give me a job?"

"That's it."

"Five hundred dollars. This is a valuable location."

"Come now," laughed Lester. "If I was crooked I could wait till they put you out day after to-morrow and get it for nothing."

"My equipment is worth a couple of hundred."

"I'm going to throw it all out and put in new stuff. Fifty dollars cash, and your salary starts to-day."

"I'll go yer," said the man with a weak grin. "I was thinking of jumpin' into the East River, only I can't swim."

"You've got to keep shaved, wear a clean white coat, and no smoking on duty. The place has to be spotless or you'll lose your job."

"Say, if you was broke you'd look as bad as I do."

"Close up and come with me to the agent. We'll put this through right away."

"All right, Santa Claus," said the fellow. "Guess this talk in the papers waked you sausage fellers up."

"I'm in business for myself, but I'm going to use Filkin sausages."

"A frankfurter is a frankfurter, and Filkin's cost too much," insisted the fellow.

"You don't have to worry about costs any more."

"Thank God for that. I could eat a nice dog myself once in awhile."

The superintendent of the building demurred when Lester announced that he was taking over the lease.

"That place has been an eyesore," he declared. "We expected this fellow to walk out any day. I don't know that we can agree to his assigning the lease."

It developed that there was a clause in the lease requiring the consent of the owner to a transfer of it, but Lester got over this by agreeing to pay ten dollars more a month. He then presented the late proprietor of the stand with fifty dollars, and telephoned to the contractor who had made his old stand so attractive, to come and estimate upon the new one.

If good locations could be picked up so inexpensively, he thought, there was no sense taking their proprietors in as stockholders, but for the present he would have to employ them to run their old places until he could get better men, if any such were available.

The transaction which placed him in control of a second place of business had not occupied an hour, but he thought he had better return to find out how Chipmunk was getting along. It was nearly time for the advance guard of noonday lunchers.

There are those who devote their noon hour to the business of lunching leisurely and pleasantly, and those who consider five minutes enough to waste on eating, and use the other fifty-five minutes to do errands, window shop, sit in the parks, or stroll about the streets. He was pleased to see a group in front of his stand, and he hastened to don his white garments and aid Colter, who was swamped with trade.

For nearly two hours both men were too busy to talk. Lester estimated that the lunch trade was nearly as good as during his prosperous days; but in his new mood he was almost sorry, for other venders would also do well and not be eager to retire from business.

During a lull after two o'clock, Colter informed him of the new arrangements with the agent.

"I thought we had to fall for his terms," he apologized. "And I knew you could refuse to sign if you thought we ought to pull out."

"An increase of a hundred fifty per cent in our rent," Lester said ruefully. "Somebody is after our lease. You did the right thing, Chip, and I'll go round and sign up. He might lease the place without consulting us if we were slow in closing the new deal."

Chipmunk was jubilant to learn that they had a second stand, and his mercurial temperament had mounted high because of the excellent noon business; he was sure now that their troubles were over. He had become a swift and efficient counter man, even if he was unable to compete with Lester as a barker.

"Hold the fort," commanded Les, "while I battle with the agent."

He entered the narrow doorway of the old building, and was lifted in the poky old elevator to the third floor, where Mr. Fanshaw, the agent, had his office, a gloomy, dust-begrimed room with ancient oak furniture and dirty windows.

There are many such offices in many such buildings in lower New York, buildings which are darkened by high steel-frame structures on all sides, and whose revenue from rentals barely pay the taxes, so tremendously has the value of the land upon which they stand risen, and whose owners are holding on to sell some day at fabulous prices.

Fanshaw had no private office; so Lester came upon him arguing with a tall, red-faced man with savage black eyes.

"I don't care what they pay, I'll top it," he declared. "You get those fellows out of there."

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Fanshaw," said Lester. "I'll wait outside until you are free."

"That's all right, Mr. Lucus," replied the agent. "That young man, your partner, agreed to pay one hundred and twenty-five dollars a month rent on a six months' lease. I don't

suppose you are willing to confirm the agreement. The place isn't worth it."

"My partner speaks for me," said Lester, regarding the red faced man suspiciously. "The place isn't worth it, but—"

"That lets them out," snapped the stranger. "Now you can talk business with me."

"I'll pay the rent and sign the lease," he finished. "Am I to understand that this gentleman is trying to take the ground from under me?"

"He is anxious to get that location," said Mr. Fanshaw. "However, we believe in giving our tenants a square deal, and I told Mr. What's-his-name—"

"Colter."

"—that he could have the place at one hundred and twenty-five dollars. I'm sorry, Mr. Nixon."

"Look here," exclaimed the red-faced man to Lester. "I'll give you five hundred dollars' bonus to move out."

"Have you got the lease ready?" asked Lester, ignoring the offer.

"A thousand cash. You won't make that in sausages in a month."

"I'll have the lease ready when your present month is up. The matter is closed," said Fanshaw. "Good day, Mr. Nixon."

With an inarticulate growl, the Nixon person departed, slamming the door after him.

"That's why you had your rent jumped on you," smiled Fanshaw. "He wants your stand something awful."

"What does he want it for?"

"Some novelty drinking fountain," he said.

"Well, let him find another place. I'd like your signature to that agreement, Mr. Fanshaw, in view of the circumstances. You might change your mind."

"I won't, but I'll fill in a lease form now if you like."

Lester waited until the printed form had been inked in, and carried off his copy with a feeling of relief. When he got back to his place of business he scrutinized it with new respect, since it seemed to be in such demand.

The premises consisted of a six-foot front, of which four feet was occupied by the window opening. It extended back twelve feet, but three feet at the rear was partitioned off for a closet and store room. There was little space behind the narrow counter, and no room for stools.

When a dozen persons were in the place, the space before the counter was congested, and there was none too much room behind for the two proprietors. The establishment was spic and span, and white and shiny, but Les didn't see why it could be so valuable to the man with the red face.

He told Arthur Colter what had transpired in the agent's office, and they congratulated each other upon their success in holding on.

"That agent seems to be a very square shooter. He might have got a couple of hundred a month for the place if he had been willing to double cross us. It's lucky you closed with him, Chipmunk."

"I'm the boy with the quick decisions," chuckled Arthur. "Though they are usually wrong."

Business was fair during the remainder of the day, and when they counted up in the early evening they found that they had about forty-five dollars profit.

"At this rate we'll clear three hundred this week," Les exulted. "The crusade against hot dogs has blown up, old man. Next week we'll have the new stand running, and maybe one or two more. I'll go out shopping again in the morning."

They divided the day's receipts for safety's sake. Since the holdup Les had become cautious, and they were locking the door when a taxi drew up, and a man hailed them from the window.

"Wait a minute," he called. "I want to see you two."

He sprang out of the taxi and approached them. He was big and beefy, and authoritative-looking.

"We're closed for the day. Sorry," declared Lester.

"I'm not a customer," rumbled the stranger. "You men are wanted."

He pulled back his coat and showed a badge on his vest.

"Do you mean we are under arrest?" demanded Chipmunk. "How do you get that way?"

"Want the bracelets on you?" demanded the officer.

"We took down the sign," declared Lester hotly. "You have no business with us."

"You come for a ride, fellers," commanded the stranger. "Better come quietly."

"But what's the charge?" implored Lester. People were passing, and some were stopping, and Chipmunk was very nervous.

"Better go with him," he urged. "Gee, we don't want a scene here, Les."

"Not till I know what it's about. Have you got a warrant?"

"Not necessary. Want me to call my partner?" He nodded to the taxi from which a second unpleasant face was glowering.

"Oh, we'll come," agreed Lester. The growing crowd embarrassed him.

"That's the thing to do," declared the officer. "The chief will tell you what you need to know."

They entered the taxi, followed by the arresting plainclothes man, who motioned to the back seat while he took a folding chair facing them.

Once seated, Lester began an oration upon his rights as an American citizen, and the high-handedness of the police, with Chipmunk as a sympathetic audience. The two captors listened stonily. The machine darted around City Hall Park in the direction of police headquarters, in the gathering dusk, but suddenly swerved up the runway to Brooklyn Bridge.

"Say, what's this?" demanded Lester. "This isn't the way to headquarters."

A gun appeared in the hand of the man who had arrested them.

"Sit down and shut up," he instructed.

CHAPTER XIV.

STRANGE FACES.

NORA MEAGHER sat in her apartment within arm's length of the telephone, an expression of irritation upon her pretty face. Randolph Milligan occupied the big armchair and talked to her about himself, but this was not the cause of her annoyance.

She could turn her ears inside out and pin a sympathetic smile on her face, for all Ranny needed was an audience. Lester Lucus had promised to take her to dinner to-night to report progress, and Lester had not telephoned to tell her where to meet him.

She had waited until seven thirty, then dined in the flat with her aunt. After that, it was time for Lester to telephone to apologize for failing to show, and this he had not done. Finally Mr. Milligan had put in an appearance with an invitation to a picture show, and Nora had been stalling for an hour in the hope of a message from the recreant.

While Mr. Milligan talked and she appeared to listen, she was cogitating somewhat in this fashion:

"It serves me right for being nice to him. He's just like all the rest of the men; when he is in trouble he rushes to a girl to get sympathy, but when everything is going well he forgets all about her.

"Wait till he shows up. I'll get even with him for making a fool of me like this. I guess I don't have to be at the beck and call of Lester Lucus.

"I suppose that Colter person dragged him off to call on the Brinker girls. Just because they have all kinds of money he'll get his head turned if they let him pick up a handkerchief for them. Men are such fools. What, Ranny?"

"For the tenth time I asked you to put on your hat and come on out; we'll be in time for the second show if you hurry."

She suddenly dazzled him with a smile. "All right, Ranny. Just let me fix my face and we'll go."

She ran out of the room, was back in five minutes wearing a cunning little hat, and followed him from the room casting a backward moue at the telephone instrument.

"I hope he calls up and finds that I am not at home," she muttered, then devoted herself to making Mr. Brinker's secretary feel that life was worth living.

As they were approaching the theater, she said casually:

"Mr. Brinker has two daughters, hasn't he?"

"I'll say he has. Peaches."

"Which is the prettiest?"

"Well, Hilda is small and blond; she is a beauty. Fran is taller, a little plump and very distinguished. They are full of fun."

"Are either of them engaged?"

"I don't believe so."

"Why don't you go after one of them, Ranny? A rich wife would be just the thing for you."

Mr. Milligan looked as though he agreed with her, but he shook his head.

"If Mr. Brinker caught me playing up to his daughters, I'd lose my job. Besides, Nora, you know what I think of you."

"You ought to have put that first," she reproved. "I suppose they have scads of money and wonderful clothes," she sighed.

"You ought to hear Mr. Brinker yelp about the bills."

After that they saw a wonderful picture full of palaces, and swimming pools and gorgeous cabarets and teeming with beautiful women and men who were too sweet to live. Nora got home at eleven thirty and found her aunt, a small, mouselike woman, sitting up for her.

"Did anybody telephone for me, auntie, dear?"

"Not a soul."

"Just you wait, Lester Lucus," she said under her breath.

Nora nursed her resentment for three days, then curiosity conquered, and during her lunch hour she strolled down Broadway toward Fulton. It was her intention to pass the white shop, nod coldly if recognized, and continue on, but when she reached it she saw a strange man standing behind the counter.

The megaphone was idle and there were only a couple of customers. A second man was in the back of the store, also a stranger.

Nora stepped up to the counter and ordered a sandwich, her curiosity changed to apprehension. The man was thin and tall. He wore a dirty white coat, and his hands were grimy. He picked up a sausage in his fingers and cuddled the roll in his left hand. Nora's stomach protested. The sausages were thin and anæmic. This was incomprehensible.

No wonder business was poor. She accepted the sandwich with disgust, and made a pretense of eating it.

"Where's Mr. Lucus?" she demanded.

The fellow regarded her with shifty blue eyes. "He had to go away," he replied.

"Where's Mr. Colter?"

"He went with him."

She frowned. "I am a particular friend of Mr. Lucus's. Can you tell me where he has gone?"

"No, mum," he replied sullenly.

"Are you working for him?"

He nodded. "We're just in here

temporarily, miss. He'll be back in a few days."

She laid the sandwich down uneaten and walked away. What could Lester be thinking of to hire a ruffian like that, and to let his food and service degenerate. Why, that fellow would drive away all the trade Les had worked so hard to build up. Those sausages were putrid, and the bread was stale.

Of course Lester had this trust bee in his bonnet and must have hired the man and the other fellow inside, while he and Chipmunk went around securing locations, but it was very short-sighted. She would show him his mistake in a minute if she could find him, but where was he?"

"Pardon me, lady, could you help a poor old man?"

She found herself confronted by a tattered old scarecrow with a soiled white beard and a pair of pale watery eyes. She shivered with disgust; yet she put her hand in her purse, for she could not resist an appeal for charity.

"Are you a friend of Mr. Lucus?" whispered the old man surprisingly.

Nora almost dropped her purse. "Yes."

"I heard you asking for him. Downing's my name. There's something wrong, miss. Mr. Lucus never put them fellers in there. They're crooks. I know Mr. Lucus well."

"But they said he hired them," she faltered.

"I warned him against that one you were talking to. I'm only a poor old tramp," he whined. "Nobody would pay any attention to me. I know they done something to Mr. Lucus."

Nora felt suddenly faint. "What can we do?" she demanded.

"Go to the police, miss. They'd just lock me up."

"Do you know where Mr. Lucus lives?"

Downing mumbled the address.

"I'll go there first and make inquiries," she said. "Here is a couple of dollars. Will you keep watch on the stand?"

"Yes, miss. You don't have to give me money."

"Take it." She drew a pencil and slip of paper from her purse, and wrote on it.

"Pardon me, lady." It was a policeman. "Is this bum asking you for money?" A heavy hand descended upon the collar of Walter Downing.

"No, no, officer," she declared. "I know the man. I'm sending him on an errand."

"He's a professional panhandler. I ought to run him in anyway."

"Please," she said with a melting smile. "I assure you, I know the man."

"Just as you say, miss, but you keep off my beat, bo," commanded the officer.

"Here is my telephone number. Call me up at seven to-night," she said in a low tone.

"Yes, miss. But I can't hang round the stand. It's on that cop's beat."

"Never mind. Call me up anyway."

Nora hastened away, a prey to dire anxiety. Something had happened to Lester. Of course he had not placed those roughs in charge of his little business. And that tramp was positive that they were criminals of some sort. The tramp was a pitiful creature, but there was something decent about him. It was like Lester to have befriended the old fellow and to say nothing about it.

She was walking rapidly, by instinct, toward the office of the Davenport Realty Corporation. What could she do? She could not prove that Lester had not hired the man, and she had only the word of a poor old tramp that they were crooks.

This explained why Lester had not put in an appearance Monday night. In some way he had been prevented. Monday—and this was Thursday! Anything might have happened. But it was inexplicable. What did they want of a little frankfurter stand?

And Lester's partner and capitalist, Mr. Colter; he had vanished too!

She was in her office by this time. The entire staff was at lunch, save the old bookkeeper, who was eating from a paper parcel in a far corner. She took the telephone book and sought the street and number given her as Lester's address by the tramp, but it was not an apartment house and was not listed.

Then she tried "Information," which, after some demur, supplied her with the number, and she called it with bated breath. After an eternity a woman answered the phone.

Yes, Mr. Lucus lived there— No, he was not at home. She had not seen him for several days— No, he had not said he would be away. She didn't know anything about him.

Nora was pale when she hung up. It was true. Lester had been spirited away.

She had enough now to justify her appealing to the police—or had she? Nora hated the thought of the police. After all, she was not related to Lester; she could not even say she was engaged to him; he probably considered her as a pleasant acquaintance, nothing more. But the beating of her heart told her that he was more than a pleasant acquaintance to her.

She wanted to talk to somebody about it, to ask advice. Mr. Davenport was impossible. She was not very friendly with anybody in the office. If she could find Chipmunk; but he might have vanished too. Stay—the Brinker girls! They were close friends of Colter. They had money and influence. Could she enlist them?

"I'm not coming back this afternoon," she told the bookkeeper. "Important private business."

"You'll lose your job," cackled the old employee.

"I should worry," she snapped as she looked up the address of Ludwig Brinker in the telephone book.

In five minutes she was in a taxi which was making slow progress uptown, while Nora chafed at each traffic delay. The Brinker residence would have awed her under ordinary circumstances, but the ornate entrance made no impression upon her now.

She pressed the bell with nervous energy. Most likely the girls would not be home. Lunching at the Ritz. Somehow this made her lip curl because life was so unfair.

The butler regarded her with consideration because she was very pretty.

Yes, the Misses Brinker were in. What name?

"They don't know my name. Tell them it is in regard to Mr. Colter that I have called."

The man looked dubious, but motioned to a seat in the hall and ascended the stairs slowly.

CHAPTER XV.

NORA FINDS ALLIES.

"MISS HILDA BRINKER will see you," the butler stated on his return. "Please wait."

Hilda came down the stairs after a half a minute's delay, wearing a house dress of purple and silver, which drew a gasp of admiration from Nora despite her anxiety.

She conceded rare beauty to the occupant of the gown, too, despite her prejudice against these wealthy girls, and Hilda's surprise at the attractiveness of her visitor was ill-concealed.

They faced each other, two lovely little creatures—Nora, with her blue-black hair and lovely creamy skin; Hilda, with her yellow crown and her great blue eyes.

"How do you do?" said the Brinker girl. "I am not sure that the butler delivered your message correctly. Was it something about Mr. Colter?"

"Yes," replied Nora. "I know it is a liberty to call on you in this manner, but do you know where he is?"

Hilda's eyes narrowed as she appraised the other.

"How should I know?" she said tartly. "Why do you come here? And what is your interest in him?"

Nora smiled disarmingly. She understood the other girl's manner. "None in Mr. Colter, except in connection with Mr. Lucus. Mr. Lucus has vanished."

"Oh," exclaimed Hilda, "so that is it? He has decamped with Arthur's money."

"Most certainly not. Something has happened to him, and I am trying to find out if Mr. Colter has disappeared with him. May I ask when you last saw Mr. Colter?"

"Why, not since Saturday," replied Hilda. "Do you mean foul play of some sort? Arthur was to take us to the theater Monday, but we did not hear from him."

"Then they are together. I know you are interested in their business affairs, Miss Brinker. Lester told me. To-day I passed their stand, and two strange men were running it. They told me that they had been hired by Lester, and both he and Mr. Colter were away."

"Please sit down. Your name is—"

"I beg your pardon. I am Nora Meagher, a friend of Mr. Lucus."

"Thank you. Why do you consider that cause for alarm?"

"I had hardly left the stand when I was accosted by a tramp who said he was a friend of Mr. Lucus's, and that he had recognized the men in their little shop as criminals. He said he had warned Lester against them, and he was sure they had done something to Lester."

Nora's voice broke a little as she finished, and, tender-hearted, Hilda reached for her hand.

"But a tramp!" she protested. "Surely—"

"I think he was an honest old creature. He gave me Lester's address, and I called up. The woman who answered said he had not been home for three or four days."

Hilda jumped to her feet.

"Good heavens! This is alarming. Arthur Colter hasn't much sense, though he is a dear, but I thought Mr. Lucus was very capable. It doesn't seem possible—do you think they have been mur—"

Hilda's composure left her. A sob stopped her speech, and in a second the two girls were weeping upon each other's shoulder.

"Of course it can't be so. They may have gone away somewhere—a stroke of business. Wait till I call my sister. Fran," she called loudly—"oh, Fran! Come downstairs quick."

Francesca's cool contralto floated down from the upper floors.

"Whatever is the matter? I'll be down as soon as I can throw on something."

The girls in the hall waited in silence until the older sister tripped down the stairs in a negligee.

"I was drying my hair," she called.

"This is Miss Nora Meagher," introduced Hilda. "My sister Francesca. She comes to tell us that Arthur Colter has disappeared. What shall we do?"

"Arthur? Absurd! Why do you think so, Miss Meagher?" asked Francesca, throwing an incredulous look at the bearer of such tidings.

"He failed to keep his date with us Monday night; you know that," cried Hilda. "And he hasn't been seen since. And Mr. Lucus has disappeared with him. Miss Meagher is a friend of Lester Lucus."

"Indeed," acknowledged Fran more cordially. "Are you sure those two boys haven't gone off on a lark of some kind? Men do sometimes."

Nora briefly repeated what she had already told Hilda, and made a profound impression.

"But why?" demanded Fran. "Do you suppose somebody is trying to get their twenty thousand dollars?"

"I know that it is safe in the bank. Lester said he would not touch it until

he was sure business justified it. And those two men in the little shop said Les had hired them. I know he would not hire people like that."

"Shouldn't we notify the police at once?" demanded Hilda. "Suppose the boys are in trouble?"

"Father likes Arthur. That is, he doesn't dislike him. Of course, he does not know Arthur is in partnership with Lester Lucus. He would know what to do," hazarded Fran.

"I thought of the police right away," Nora declared. "Only they haven't been missing long. Perhaps the police would laugh at us. And those men will insist they were hired by the boys to take their places while they went away for a few days. It isn't as if we were the sisters or wives of either of them."

"I don't hanker raising a hullabaloo about Arthur Colter, that crack-brained kid," said the practical Fran. "You know, Hilda, that if somebody invited him to go in an airplane across the Atlantic he would go at a moment's notice."

"Arthur is not crack-brained," protested Hilda, almost in tears. "I think you are hard and unfeeling—so there."

"Miss Meagher points out that we have no right to make inquiries about them. Most likely the police would think the boys had run away from us."

"Their business—they would not leave that!" wailed Nora.

"We know they were all pepped up about their queer business, but a frankfurter stand won't sound like much to leave. And father would raise the roof if we mixed up in a disappearance case."

"You needn't worry," said Nora stiffly. "I'm not afraid to do anything I can for my friends. I'll go to police headquarters.

Fran put her arm around the shoulder of the smaller girl.

"I'm worried, I admit it, Miss Meagher, though Arthur is more Hilda's friend than mine, and I have only met Mr. Lucus once or twice. But, if they have been gone three days, a few hours more or less won't make much difference.

"Now, you said that tramp was going to telephone to you this evening. Perhaps he will have some information, and then we'll have something to go on.

"Of course, you will do as you please, but I suggest waiting. If you could make the tramp tell the police what he knows—"

"I am afraid he won't. He said he didn't dare go near them."

"Well, we can report what he said, and then the officers can round him up."

"That seems unfair," said Nora dubiously.

"Finding the boys if they are in danger is more important than whether a tramp gets locked up or not, isn't it?"

"Of course."

"Well, then. We'll break our engagement for this evening and stay home. After the tramp has talked with you, call us up or come to see us, and we'll all go together to police headquarters, no matter whether father likes it or not."

"You are a trump, Miss Brinker," cried Nora gratefully. "I am sure you are right."

"Have you known Lester Lucus long?" asked Hilda. "We think he is charming, and when this is all cleared up I hope we'll see something of you, Miss Meagher."

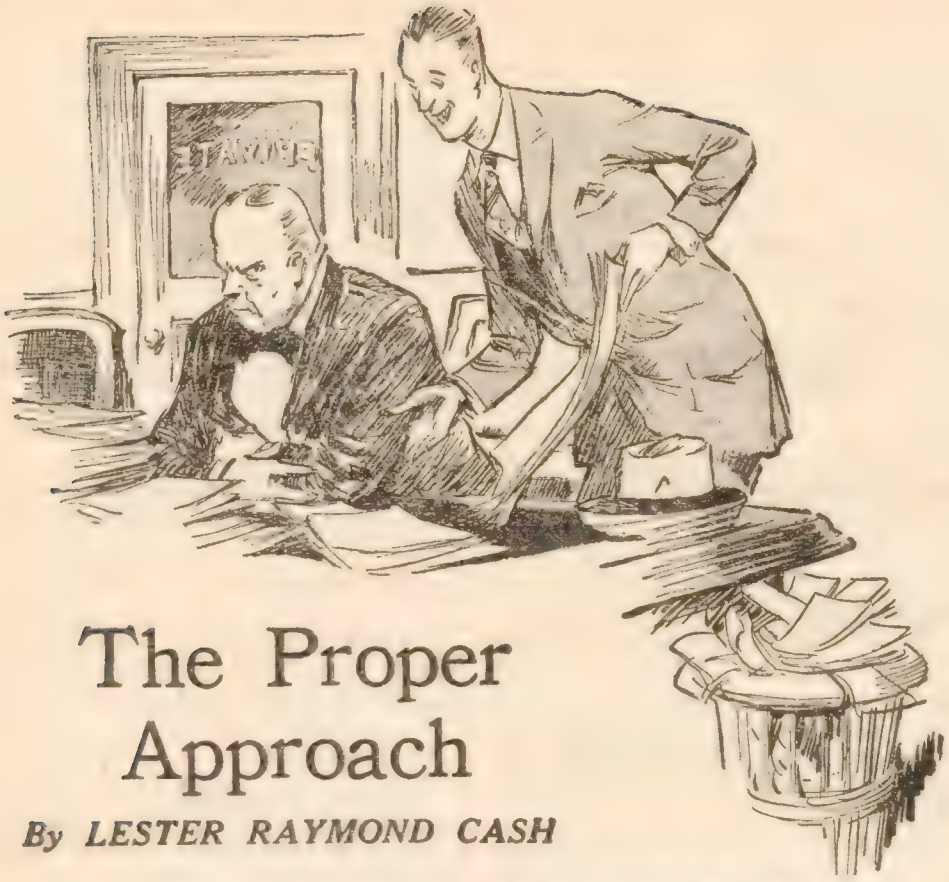
"Thank you," Nora said dryly. "I was the stenographer in the real estate office where Les used to work."

She imagined she saw a diminution in their cordiality, but perhaps she only imagined it.

"You'll be sure to call us immediately after the tramp calls you," urged Fran.

"Yes, indeed."

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK



The Proper Approach

By LESTER RAYMOND CASH

Overcoming sales resistance by a new method that has little to do with the article to be sold

LANGFORD DAVIS, general manager of the Seminole Glimp Company, glanced up from his littered desk, and a frown of annoyance corrugated his high forehead. Slowly he turned in his chair and faced the young man who stood at his side.

"Well?" asked Mr. Davis, and the tone of his voice revealed his irritation.

Rodney Witt cleared his throat.

"Mr. Davis," he said, "I am representing the Consolidated Skipple Company, and I'd like to place our proposition before you. I'm not here to take up your time with a lot of useless details. Your time is valuable, and I don't intend to waste it for you. All I want is to present a few facts for your consideration, which will take me but a few minutes.

"As to the skipple which we are producing, we feel that it is the finest on the market. Our records will bear me out in the statement that it is giving universal satisfaction. But I am not going into a detailed description of it or its merits. You, as a large user of skipples, are no doubt familiar with our product, and anything I might say regarding it would simply be telling you what you already know. You are, I am sure, concerned mostly with our price and the quantity available.

"Last month we moved into our new factory, which is equipped throughout with the most modern ma-

chinery. This has enabled us to increase our output until we are now in a position to turn out any amount necessary to fulfill our contracts. We are at present producing twelve thousand a day for the ordinary trade, but could easily triple our production at a moment's notice, and increase it as much beyond that it might be necessary.

"As to the price"—he dug into his pocket and produced a legal document—"you will find here a contract already drawn up for you to sign, at a price that you must find attractive. That is all I have to say, Mr. Davis. I will let the contract talk for itself."

Rodney spread open the document and ceremoniously laid it on the desk in front of Mr. Davis, then stepped back, smiling with confidence.

Mr. Davis glanced casually at the contract, then folded it up and handed it back to Rodney.

"Nothing doing!" he snapped. "Good day."

He picked up a letter from the desk and immediately became engrossed in its contents. Rodney stood nonplused, as though he had been slapped—which he had, in effect. Again he proffered the rejected document to Mr. Davis.

"Then you don't care to consider it?" he asked.

"No!" growled Mr. Davis. "I haven't time to listen to you! Good day."

Disconsolately Rodney picked his hat from the top of Mr. Davis's desk and turned to leave. Then an idea struck him, and once again he faced his difficult prospect.

"Could I make an appointment to see you when you are not so busy?" he asked. "I am sure that I could make you a proposition to your advantage if I could see you when you have more leisure."

"No!" growled Mr. Davis again. "You Consolidated fellows make me sick. You're the third, and I don't want to see any more of you." He angrily punched a buzzer and, as a stenographer came in one door, Rodney left by another.

II.

Mr. Gordon, sales manager of the Consolidated, puffed angrily at his cigar, raising great clouds of smoke. Across the desk from him sat Rodney Witt, and, as he saw the quick puffs shoot from his superior's mouth, his heart sank in trepidation. The sign never failed, and Rodney knew that he was "in for it."

"A fine lot of salesmen!" burst out Gordon, slapping the desk angrily with his flat hand. "Why in hell I can't get a salesman that can bring in a worth while order is beyond me! What do you do—go up there and *look* at him? Tongue-tied or something?"

"No, sir," mumbled Rodney, nervously crossing his legs.

"I explained to you carefully that all you had to do was to show him that contract. *I* know his type. He doesn't want to be snowed under with a lot of talk. You can talk a fellow like that *out* of a contract easier than you can talk him *into* one. Just give him a plain statement of what we can do and show him the contract.

"He knows our firm, and that we can back up our promises. He also understands the Consolidated Skipple as well as you or I do. All he wants is *facts*—and they're all on the contract, including a price that I know Jones & Kimpton can't meet, and he's buying from them now. Any office boy ought to be able to handle him."

"Supposing he won't read the contract?" asked Rodney.

"*Make* him read it! Rush him! He's the type. 'Here's a pen and here's the dotted line.' That's the way *I'd* handle him."

Rodney was about to say "Maybe you'd better do it, then," but discretion came to the front, and he remained silent. Gordon continued:

"You've got one more chance, Witt.

Either I have that contract—signed—on my desk by Thursday evening, or you follow Craig and McFarland, and I'll go after him myself. You fellows have got to produce results or get out. That's all."

"Yes, sir," said Rodney, and left the room, crestfallen at the ultimatum of his chief, although he had expected something of the sort. Gordon was renowned as a hard driver, but he usually got results.

Following the interview with his chief, Rodney returned to his desk in the big outer room set aside for the use of the Consolidated's salesmen. Flopping back in the swivel chair he gave himself up to a gloomy contemplation of the situation.

He was frankly worried and distressed at the thought of severing his connection with the Consolidated. It was a good company to work for. He was making good money, and knew that he would have difficulty in finding another position as good as this.

But, aside from his own pride in the matter, Rodney had another urgent reason for not losing his job. That reason was blond, and answered to the name of Margaret Blaine.

Margaret did not know that she was so important in Rodney's calculations—at least, he had never hinted to her of such a thing. For two years Rodney had worshiped her, but something in her manner—a cool reserve it might be called—had held him from proclaiming his affections.

He had always intended doing so, and was only awaiting the opportune moment when that reserve might be dissipated for awhile, but, somehow, that moment never arrived. She was friendly enough, and always seemed interested in him and his affairs, but always there was that attitude that made him believe she would balk at the first sign of anything deeper than mere friendship.

The truth is, he was afraid of her. She baffled him, and he feared to risk a too sudden declaration lest he might ruin all his chances. Therefore, he had adopted this policy of watchful waiting.

The possibility of losing his position with the Consolidated had placed another obstacle in his winning of Margaret, for Margaret's family was well-to-do, and she was used to all the comforts of a good home and good clothes. Rodney knew that he could never ask her to share an income one cent smaller than he was now receiving.

Rodney leaned back in his chair and stared gloomily at the ceiling. He felt that he was being done an injustice of a sort, since he had merely followed Gordon's instructions in approaching Mr. Davis. At the same time he did not see how he could have improved on his argument.

Davis was famous for his strict attention to business, and was considered a hard man to meet, due to his intense industry. Seldom did a salesman stand a chance with him, as his excuse of "too busy" dismissed them before they were started.

This excuse had impressed all salesmen with the necessity of rushing him—giving him the mere facts and figures, and trusting in his judgment to decide on the merits of the proposition. Occasionally, of course, he was "sold," otherwise his firm could have conducted no business, and these incidental successes served to convince other hopeful salesmen that the accepted method of approaching him was the proper one.

Thus Rodney felt that he could not be blamed for his failure. He had done all that any one could do under the circumstances—yet, in the face of that, he must again approach Mr. Davis and secure his signature to a contract by the following Thursday. There was nothing to do but repeat his former attempt, and he knew that he must again meet with failure.

For an hour Rodney was deep in thought, searching his memory and

prodding his imagination for some way of overcoming Mr. Davis's resistance, but at the end of that time he was as far from a solution as ever. Then he straightened up and reached for his phone.

"No use going any further tonight," he thought. "My mind's going around in circles, and I'll be dippy if I don't quit. This is Friday, so I've still got almost a week. Maybe an idea will pop up in the meantime. Guess I'll take Margaret to a show and get my mind off my troubles."

III.

THE show was a dull one, and exerted a depressing effect upon Margaret and Rodney, so both were quiet on the way home. This naturally caused his thoughts to revert to his trouble of the day, so that even her awakened vivacity upon their return to her home failed to stimulate him.

Presently she noticed his abstraction and inquired: "What's the matter, Rodney? You act like you had a thousand pounds on your mind."

"Oh, nothing," he smiled. "Just a little matter of business."

"You mustn't let your business affect you like that. Cheer up. Maybe it's not so bad as it seems."

"Worse," he said, then could have kicked himself for admitting to her the existence of any difficulties. In an attempt to allay the look of concern on her face he suggested: "Won't you play something, Margaret? That show made me kind of blue, and I need some music to cheer me up."

"No, I won't," she declared. "That play had nothing to do with it. You've got something on your mind that's bothering you. Won't you tell me? Maybe I can help you."

The temptation was strong to tell her that she could help more than she realized, but he held his tongue and merely smiled a refusal.

"Oh, please, Rodney," she begged. "That is, unless it's something *terribly* secret. Dad often tells me of his business affairs, and you've no idea how much help I've been to him. Really, I know lots of things that would surprise some of you salesmen. In fact, I've made quite a study of such things—all for my own amusement, of course."

Her sudden interest touched a responsive chord, and immediately Rodney found himself telling her the whole story of his attempt to "sell" Mr. Davis and its possibly tragic result. She listened with rapt attention, and for the time being her air of reserve seemed to have disappeared.

It was the nearest she had ever come to any degree of intimacy, and, had he not been faced by the prospect of losing his job, Rodney might have gone further and told her of his love for her; but now that was more out of the question than ever."

When he had finished she was silent for a moment, then asked:

"What sort of a looking man is this Mr. Davis?"

"Oh," answered Rodney, searching vaguely for some means of description, "he's about my size, bald-headed, wears glasses, clean-shaven—sort of a professor-looking fellow."

"I see," she mused. "Do you recall the shape of his forehead?"

"Well, it is pretty high, like he had a lot of brains."

"Does it slope back from his eyes or go straight up?"

"It sort of bulges out, as I remember.

"How about his chin?"

"Sticks out—very firm."

She smiled in amusement.

"And you were trying to rush a man like that and give him facts, nothing but facts? Rodney, I'm surprised at you."

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"Rodney," she said, "you're all wrong. You couldn't sell him a thing that way—not in a million years."

She went to the bookcase and took from it a large volume, then sat down on the settee.

"Are you willing to take a chance on an idea of mine?" she asked.

"Why, I guess so," he answered, surprised. "What is it?"

"Come over here and I'll show you," she answered, making room for him at her side.

Her eyes were glowing with excitement, and he had never seen her so enthused over anything.

Obediently he took the place she indicated and sat down.

She opened the book, and he saw that it was filled with line drawings and photographs of faces of all shapes and descriptions, varied occasionally with pictures of individual features and hands.

Rapidly she turned the pages until she came to the picture for which she was searching.

"Is your friend Davis something like that?" she asked.

Rodney stared at the picture she indicated.

"I should say so!" he exclaimed. "It might almost be a photograph of him."

"Read what it has to say."

Rodney read, and a look of surprise came over his face.

"Well, I'll be darned!" he said. "What chumps we've been! Margaret, do you mind if I take this book with me and study it for awhile?"

"Of course not," she assented. "Keep it as long as you need it. I'm through with it."

"I think you've shown me my one chance to make good," he said gratefully. "If I get that order I'll owe it all to you."

As he looked at her his heart was in his eyes, but once again she was the calm young person he had feared for so long, and the words he would have uttered stuck in his throat.

"I hope it helps you," she said quietly. "I have utter faith in that book and have profited by it in a number of ways."

Abruptly she got up and went to the piano. In a moment she was running through a repertoire of the latest popular music; but for once Rodney had no ears for it.

Instead, he was absorbed in a study of the numerous cuts contained in the book. When he left, half an hour later, he carried the book with him.

IV.

It was Tuesday night and Rodney was working late. He was at his desk at the office. In front of him perched a typewriter, at which he was hammering busily, while at its side rested a pile of typed papers.

Back of the machine was a heap of literature, comprising all the facts and figures relative to the Consolidated Skipple. From time to time Rodney referred to these pamphlets, then resumed his typing, while the pile of finished pages steadily bulked higher.

At ten o'clock the door opened and Mr. Gordon entered.

"Evening, Witt," he said. "What are you doing?"

Rodney stretched before answering, then replied:

"Just working on a little idea, Mr. Gordon."

"Have you seen Davis?"

"Not yet."

"Well, remember what I said—Thursday's the dead line. You'd do better to be working on *him* instead of fooling with that stuff."

He passed into his private office. Rodney smiled quizzically and resumed his typing.

The following afternoon at one thirty Rodney picked up his typewritten pages, now bound together with staples and covered with a neat, blue manuscript cover, and started to leave the office. On second thought he returned to his desk and picked up the telephone.

"That you, Margaret?" he asked, when his number had been rung. "This is Rodney. Just wanted to tell you that I'm about to beard the lion in his den— Yes, going to try your scheme— I'll let you know how it turns out. 'By."

A moment later he was in the street. The offices of the Seminole Glimp Co. were on the other side of town, so Rodney got his coupé from a near-by parking station to drive there. Until now his enthusiasm and confidence had flown high, but now that he was actually on the way to test his scheme, with his job hanging in the balance, he was not so sure of himself.

Maybe he was placing too much reliance on that book. It might work out in a majority of cases, but Davis might be the exception. But then, he had failed before, using the accepted method. He could do no worse this way.

Gradually his confidence came back, and when he arrived at the Seminole Building he was again sure of himself.

He gave his card to an office girl and waited anxiously for her return, mentally rehearsing his speech while he fidgeted in the uncomfortable chair he had been invited to occupy. The girl was gone but a minute, then handed back his card with the disquieting information that "Mr. Davis is too busy to see you."

This was an unexpected setback. Entirely occupied with his sales proposition, Rodney had failed to consider the idea of not being admitted.

For a moment he was in a quandary, then a thought struck him, and he wrote rapidly on the back of his card:

> Please don't misunderstand my mission. We are trying to produce the most perfect skipple possible, and believe we are doing so, but, recognizing you as one of the undoubted authorities along that line, would like to obtain your ideas of what a skipple should be. We thus hope to gain some information that will help us to better our product—if that is possible. You will be doing the whole industry a great favor if you can grant me a few minutes of your time.

He gave this to the girl, and she disappeared with it. Rodney was now consumed with anxiety. He had fired the opening gun of his campaign, and it remained to be seen if it would work. If his message failed, his hope was gone, as the time was too short for further maneuvering.

The girl was absent much longer than before, but this time she carried no card upon her return.

"You can see him for a minute," she announced, and opened the gate that admitted Rodney to the private precincts of the organization.

He followed her across a room filled with stenographers and clerks to a door marked "Langford Davis, General Manager. Private." She opened this, and Rodney entered the room in which his future was at stake.

Mr. Davis looked up from his still littered desk, and grunted—"Have a chair."

Rodney seated himself near the desk and waited for Mr. Davis to open the conversation, which Davis seemed in no mood to do. Presently, however, he shoved the débris aside, leaned his arm on the cleared space, and turned to face Rodney.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"I explained that partially on my card," said Rodney, carefully, "but would like to tell you more. As you know, we are manufacturing a skipple that is in almost universal use, and has proven itself highly satisfactory. At the same time we are willing to admit that no matter how excellent a product may be, there is always room for improvement. With that thought in mind we conceived the idea of approaching a few of the leaders in industries using skipples and finding from them just what they would require a perfect skipple to be. From the experience of these men we hope

to gain an idea or two that may lead to a new line of experimentation. I don't think I need to say that your name was the first suggested, and I have therefore come to you before seeing any of the others."

Davis cleared his throat and knitted his brows in an attitude of concentration.

"Is this an interview for publication?" he demanded.

"It might be," admitted Rodney. "That is, if you have no objections. Otherwise it will be entirely confidential."

"Um—yes. Well, I see nothing particularly confidential about it. You are at liberty to publish my remarks if you wish."

"Thank you," said Rodney.

"Well," droned Mr. Davis, while Rodney industriously took notes in what he considered looked like shorthand, "to my mind a skipple should be—"

The skipple is a highly technical little instrument that is necessary in the manufacture of certain articles—such as glimps—and a recital of its points would be tiring to any one but a person directly interested in its peculiar mechanism. We will, therefore, skip Mr. Davis's speech and take up the conversation a half hour later.

"Thank you very much," said Rodney, as Mr. Davis stopped for breath. "You have helped us wonderfully. Now, I would like to ask one more favor of you. I have here some details regarding our plant, its equipment and the skipple itself, and I would like to have you look over it and express your opinion on any phases you may care to remark."

He handed Mr. Davis the pages he had typed the night before. Mr. Davis frowned as he noted its bulk, but could hardly refuse such a request, so started to look through them.

"We are not conceited at our place," went on Rodney. "We believe that we can only improve by criticism—that is, unbiased and constructive criticism by competent persons. So don't spare us. Give me your frank opinion of anything you wish."

Davis grunted an acknowledgment of the remarks, but was engrossed in the statement Rodney had prepared. Word for word he read it, and, noticing his concentration, Rodney was amused.

Several times Davis seemed about to speak, but always the next sentence seemed to halt him. Finally he turned the last page and handed the manuscript to Rodney.

"Nothing to criticize," he said reluctantly. "You seem to have a fine article there, in fact, about what I specified to you. Um-m—what price are you quoting?"

V.

HALF an hour before closing time Rodney walked into Gordon's office and threw a document on Gordon's desk.

"What's that?" asked Gordon.

"That's a signed and sealed contract with the Seminole Glimp Company," answered Rodney. "Read it and give thanks."

"Good boy!" applauded Gordon. "Fine work, Witt. I knew you could do it. Just followed my suggestion, didn't you?"

"No."

"You didn't?"

"No—just the reverse."

"Well, how did he happen to sign this?"

"It's a long story, but I'll make it short. I happened on a book the other night that showed me where we had been making a big mistake in thinking we could shoot merely facts at Davis and make a sale. The fact is—he can't absorb facts! He's not the type. Ever hear of characterology?

"Well, that's a science that shows you what a man's characteristics are by the shape and size of his features.

Take Davis, for example. He has a high, bulging forehead. That's called a 'slow' forehead, and means that he thinks slowly. He's smart enough, but his mind is better for memorizing than for snap judgment such as we were trying to force out of him. He needs lots of details about a thing to make the idea soak in.

"Then, take his chin. Sticks 'way out—a 'slow' chin. That means that he acts slowly. His mind is fully made up before he acts. No use trying to rush him into anything. The only way to 'sell' him is to give him all the possible details about a proposition, so that he can judge it from all angles."

"But how could you do that?" objected Gordon. "Thought he was always too busy to talk."

"That 'too busy' is only an excuse of his—sort of a protection he uses to keep from becoming confused at rapid-fire arguments from slick salesmen. He knows his stuff, but he needs time to think it over. Of course, he really is a hard worker. His big nose shows lots of energy.

"But I got around that excuse. Ever notice his short upper lip? Vanity. Well, I soft-soaped him into thinking that I only wanted to get his valuable opinion as an expert on skipples, which he was glad to give me. I told him that I might want his remarks for publication, which tickled his vanity some more.

"All that is true enough; any firm is always glad to get the exact dope on what a customer firm expects of its product, and also his remarks would make a nice story for our salesmen's journal.

"When he got through telling me what he would like in the way of skipples, I gave him the full and complete details regarding our skipple, typewritten in such a form that he had plenty of time to digest them. As a result, he found that our product very nearly tallied with his own remarks, and the natural result of that was for him to give me an order. And there it is."

"Well, that's rich!" exclaimed Gordon. "You're due for a raise for this, Witt."

"Thanks," grinned Rodney, rising. "I'll probably need it. I've learned some other things about characterology and I'm in a hurry to try them out. See you to-morrow."

Margaret herself answered his ring and showed her surprise at his calling at that hour. Her surprise was even greater, however, when he drew her to him and planted a kiss on her lips.

For a moment she struggled, then hid her face on his shoulder with a sigh.

"What's come over you, Rodney?" she asked later, when able to talk rationally. "How did you ever come to do this so suddenly?"

"Your book," he answered, grinning. "That stuff worked with Davis, so I thought I'd try it on you."

"And it worked again?"

"I'll say it did! Margaret, why did you always act so cold and indifferent to me when you have such a long, affectionate little finger? And your upper lip is short, too—you show passive affection. And you have a little dimple of affection in your chin."

"I had to, dear," she said. "I didn't want to become engaged just yet, and I had studied you carefully, and knew that you would take advantage of the least sign of affection on my part. You have a quick, impulsive chin, but your face is a trifle narrow, and I knew that you would be just a little bit timid or uncertain, in spite of your energetic nose. So I had to act a part, but I'm glad it's over now."

"That goes for me, too. And now, if you don't mind, dear, I'd like to analyze your father a little while before I put the proposition up to him. And, if he wants facts or details, I can give him plenty of either now that I've got a raise."

THE END

Damming Hairpin Cañon

By C. C. WADDELL

Author of "Somewhere in Nevada," "Adventure's Price," etc.

When the sheriff is crooked and a lady is in distress, what can a man accustomed only to riding bucking flivvers do?

CHAPTER XIV.

WOMAN'S WITS.

J. P. BLAIR, who had been out inspecting the estate under the guidance of Big Bill, came back to the house to find Molly alone, and nervously tapping her foot.

"Where is Gladys?" he asked.

"She went for a walk, and I suppose has strayed farther than she realized. But you needn't be alarmed, Mr. Blair! Nothing could happen to her in the grounds.

"I only wish I could say the same for Mr. Rich," Molly added, stepping to the window and looking out. "He drove off into a rather rough and lonely part of the country this afternoon, and I am beginning to get alarmed. He should have been back before this."

"Oh, Norman will turn up all right." Blair gave a reassuring wave of the hand. "For all his air of unsophistication, he has a faculty for landing on top.

"By the way, Miss Todd," he squared around toward her, "is he so absolutely essential to you?"

"Why?"

"Well, I'll tell you. I have a whale of a big machinery contract to fill in the next two weeks, and I have no one with me that I can trust to do it properly. It is a pretty important matter to me, and I offered Norman every inducement on earth this afternoon if he would go back and assume his old position. But he refused."

"I don't wonder," said Molly a bit sharply. "After the way you let him out. He told me about it."

"That was one of the great mistakes of my business career," J. P. said soberly. "However, it was not on

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for April 7

that account he was holding back. It seemed to be out of a feeling of loyalty to you.

"Now, surely there is nothing of such moment in a private secretary's duties," he urged, "as to justify him in this stand. So I was wondering if maybe you would not speak to him, and release him to me.

"He wants to come. He realized that it is a great opportunity for him. But he says that he must remain here, until he has settled certain matters for you."

"I see," Molly nodded. "That is foolish of him of course. I will speak to him for you, Mr. Blair, if—when he comes."

She arose and went again to the window, returning to her seat with an anxious shake of the head.

Blair, too, was beginning to look uneasy.

"It's commencing to get quite dark," he said. "Are you sure that nothing could happen to Gladys, Miss Todd? Possibly, she has got lost?"

"That would be rather difficult," Molly pointed out, "with the lights of the house always visible to guide her back."

They sat on talking to cover their anxiety. The dinner hour was now long past, and still there was no sign of the two absentees.

To relieve J. P.'s growing nervousness, Molly, although she still insisted that no possible harm could have befallen Gladys, summoned Big Bill and instructed him to have a thorough search made of the grounds.

Then they settled down once more to making conversation.

"You have a very remarkable estate, Miss Todd," said Blair. "Shows what can be accomplished in this country by proper irrigation. I was greatly interested in your results, as I have been planning something of the kind myself. About a year ago, I bought up that plateau on the Bridger County side of Hairpin Cañon, and—"

But just then Jarley appeared to announce that Mr. Blair was wanted on the telephone, and, plugging in, handed him the instrument.

"Hello!" Molly heard him answer a trifle shakily. "Yes, this is Blair speaking. Oh, hello, Crawford. I was wondering who would call me up out here.

"What's that?" His voice rose to a sudden startled pitch. "Say it again. Gladys and Norman Rich have eloped? How do you know? They passed you in a flivver together about fifteen minutes ago, and stopped to tell you to notify me? Which way did they—"

But he had to stop and cut off then, in order to render assistance to his hostess, who had toppled over from her chair to the floor.

For the first time in her life, Molly Todd had fainted.

In a few minutes, though, she had recovered, and although Blair urged her to go to her room, she insisted on ordering the belated dinner served and taking her place at the head of the table.

Crawford, recalled meanwhile to the telephone, had been able to add but little to his original statement.

He had been hailed as he was passing along the street, he said, and stopping, was surprised to find himself accosted by Norman and Miss Blair. They were in a flivver belonging to the Todd estate, and seemed to be in a great hurry.

They told him they were on their way to get married, and asked him to inform Gladys's father. Then they had driven away, whither he could not say, but he had a suspicion that they were heading toward Mexico.

"Well," said J. P. thoughtfully, "Norman and Gladys were boy and girl sweethearts of course, but I supposed that was all over long ago. What gravels me, though, is why Gladys didn't tell me about it. Sort of crazy idea, it seems, scooting off this way.

They had no reason to believe that I would offer any objections."

"What I would like to know, too," questioned Molly, "is where they met, and when they planned this step? It could not have been arranged in advance.

"I am certain that Mr. Rich had no warning of her arrival here. His surprise at seeing you and her was too unfeignedly genuine."

"And that goes for Gladys, too," agreed J. P. "It was only by a fluke, as you might say, that she came with me. She had made all arrangements to stay with some friends at Santa Fe, but at the last moment they had sickness in the house, and she had to come along.

"What I think," he pondered, "is that they must have met somewhere, and made up their minds to this thing on the spur of the moment."

"And what I think," said Molly contemptuously, "is that your man, Crawford, is a clumsy liar."

"What do you mean?" Blair laid down his knife and fork, and stared at her.

"Just what I say. The facts are all against this elopement story. In the first place, there could have been no preconcerted arrangement for anything of the sort.

"The only time they saw each other was on the street to-day when we were all together, and certainly no one could say there was anything loverlike in their attitude there. In fact, Mr. Rich started to congratulate your daughter on her engagement to Crawford.

"On top of that," continued Molly, "as you have already suggested, there was no reason for such an escapade. You would have offered no objections.

"But, more than all else, two things convince me that this story is untrue. If Norman Rich could not have been tempted to desert my interests by the bait you dangled before him, neither would he have sacrificed his loyalty in this fashion.

"That is one thing. And the other"—she hesitated, and a slight tinge of color rose to her cheek—"is that he was wholly and devotedly in love with me."

"What did happen then?" demanded Blair sharply, pressing his clenched fists down on the table.

"What did happen?" repeated Molly. "I'll tell you. Norman Rich came out to the castle here about twilight. I have already learned by telephone the time he left Salem and also when he passed through Rio Rita, so, knowing that he had no accident or misadventure on the way out here as one of my men has been over the road since, I can estimate his arrival almost exactly.

"And just at that time, your daughter was out walking in the grounds. The lodgekeeper saw her strolling about down near the gates. What more probable then, but that they encountered one another?"

"Well, isn't that just what I say?" broke in J. P. "They met, and on the spur of the moment decided to get married."

"Not at all. They met and Gladys suggested that he get out and walk back to the house with her. They were old friends and had many things to talk about. Maybe, she wanted to ask him what he meant by attempting to congratulate her.

"As I see it," Molly went on, "he assented, and they started off on the footpath through the grounds. But their movements were under surveillance. And as they strolled along, they were seized and abducted."

"By whom?" demanded Blair.

"By agents of your man, Crawford, and the same gang that has already twice tried to assassinate Norman Rich. They were lurking in the grounds, waiting for the chance to get him or me. And when they saw him and Gladys together, they made the mistake of taking her for me, and grabbed them both.

"Then they loaded them into the convenient flivver, and carried them off. Later, Crawford, learning of the blunder which had been made, concocted this story to cover things up."

"But," Blair frowned, seeking for a flaw in her theory, "how could they have been carried off in this fashion, without the lodge keeper seeing them?"

"There is another exit from the grounds," Molly said a little uncertainly, "a short cut that Big Bill often uses. True, it's no more than a bridle-path, if that, rough and ungraded. Still, at a pinch—"

She broke off as Jarley entered to hand her a message, a brief, penciled report from Big Bill, out searching the grounds.

"Ah!" she exclaimed. "Here's proof of what I say. They've found where the flivver was left parked beside the driveway. They've found tracks of it again on the short cut that I spoke of.

"And, most convincing of all, they've found a spot beside the lake, where the shrubbery was broken down as with a struggle, and there on the ground was an empty chloroform bottle."

At this confirmation, Blair went white as a sheet, and seemed, for a moment, about to collapse.

"And where are they now?" he gasped.

"That's what I want you to tell me!" Molly suddenly turned on him, flaming. "And I want you to tell me —quick!"

As she spoke, she jerked a small automatic from the corsage of her dinner gown, and covered him with it.

"I?" he recoiled before her threatening attitude.

"Yes, you, you old scorpion! Do you think you can put anything like this over on me?

"After this blunder was made, you and Crawford thought no doubt you could impose on me with this silly story. You were very quick to accept it. But I knew better. I knew that Norman Rich would have returned to me to-night unless he had been prevented.

"And now you are trying to bull me into a belief that you don't know what has happened!" Her eyes blazed at him scornfully over the pointing pistol.

"Isn't Crawford your man? Hasn't every move in this underhand game of bribery and corruption and double dealing and fraud and attempted murder been dictated by you? Will you try to tell me that you are not the master crook who, lurking in the background, has pulled all these wires?

"You are a pretty good actor, but you can't choke that down my throat. Why, you practically admitted it all, when you let out to me that you owned the Bridger County plateau."

But Blair had recovered his poise to a certain extent by this time.

"Miss Todd," he lifted his hand to stay her, "I don't know what all this means that you are accusing me of. But I haven't time to find out now, or to refute your charges. That can wait.

"The important thing is, that for the present you should take my word, that I have no more knowledge of what has happened to these two, or of their whereabouts than you have."

He was once more the forceful, keen-witted executive, shearing away all nonessentials from the discussion, and striking straight at the root of the issue.

"We have a common interest," he said. "You want to find Norman Rich. I want to find Gladys. I've got to." His voice broke, but he mastered his emotion. "The obvious thing is for us to join forces."

Hesitatingly Molly lowered her revolver. There was something about the father's tone and manner that compelled conviction. Surely no one could feign such a sincerity of grief and anxiety. Then suspicion kindled again in her eyes.

"Isn't Crawford your man?" she demanded stormily.

"He is my evil genius," said Blair. "But let all that go for the time being," he pleaded. "Help me to find my daughter."

"Crawford knows where she is," said Molly.

Blair gave a start.

"Of course! I must be losing my wits." He was already hurrying to the telephone.

But he was unable to get Crawford on the wire either at the hotel or elsewhere is Rio Rita.

"This is hopeless!" He slammed the receiver down on the hook. "How can I get to the village? Better that way, anyhow. I'll get the truth from Crawford then, if I have to choke the skunk into telling me."

"I'll drive you," offered Molly quickly. "My roadster is already at the door. And Big Bill will go with me," she added significantly, "in case there is any man-handling to be done."

Only one bit of conversation passed between her and Blair, as the three of them raced along the road.

"What could possibly be Crawford's idea?" he puzzled, turning to Molly. "He must have known that he couldn't keep Gladys a prisoner indefinitely, and that when she got free, she would tell the whole story."

"I think," said Molly, keeping her eyes steadily on her driving, although her fingers trembled slightly where they rested on the wheel, "that to carry out this elopement story, Norman and Gladys are already being carried off to Mexico.

"Then, if their bodies are found in some out of the way place below the border, it can readily be ascribed to the work of Mexican bandits."

J. P. sank back with an involuntary groan against the cushions, and after that confined his remarks solely to the one word, "Faster!—Faster!"

At the hotel, he sprang from the car almost before it stopped, and with an agility that belied his years, hurried inside.

But almost immediately he was out again. Crawford had checked out a short time before, taken his bag, and hastened away, no one knew where.

"Take me to the sheriff's office!" snapped J. P.

But the sheriff was gone, too. In fact, the whole courthouse seemed deserted. The offices usually alight at that hour were empty, and nobody was about.

Finally, Big Bill elicited from one of the hangers-on about the place, that the entire crew of county officials had gone over to the Bridger County side of the cañon.

They had heard, somehow, of that notice which Norman Rich had prepared, and were fleeing before the storm which they expected it to raise.

CHAPTER XV.

STILL MISSING.

EVERY road that led out of Rio Rita—in the direction of the border, or elsewhere—was scoured by searchers sent out by Blair. But to no avail.

No trace of the missing flivver or of Norman and Gladys was elicited from any source, except for one vague clew furnished by that same bearded settler who had hired his mustang pony to Norman at the scene of the railroad wreck.

Going home from Rio Rita after dark that evening on his tricky, little mount, he claimed to have been passed on the trail to Los Chicos Junction by a car of that description.

The incident was impressed upon his mind by the fact that his pony had balked squarely across the roadway, compelling the flivver to come to a halt, until he was able to yank the stubborn beast around so as to give a right of way.

On account of the darkness, and also

because the curtains had been drawn he was uncertain as to the occupants of the car. But there had been one man beside the driver on the front seat, and he was inclined to think, two people in the back. Also, he had heard something that sounded like the quickly stifled cry of a woman after the flivver had passed him.

The spot, he said, was about three miles out from town, close to the point where the railroad curved around to run parallel with the highway.

This sounded promising. But a most intensive search farther in the same direction failed to reveal the faintest scrap of confirmatory evidence. A number of people were found who had been traveling that road at the time, but none of them could remember having seen a car of that sort.

Nor was there any one at the junction who had observed it passing through. And more significant still, no filling station had served it with gas or oil. Considering that Norman had already been to Salem and back, it was obvious that no great distance could have been covered with the meager supply of gasoline remaining in the tank.

Reasoning from this fact, Molly and Blair were both inclined to conclude that the abductors had betaken themselves to some hangout or stronghold—a cave or gully, or perhaps an isolated dwelling—probably not far from the spot where the pony's owner had seen them on the trail; and there had hidden away the flivver and their prisoners.

This was a relief in a way, for it indicated that the stratagem of hurrying the two off to Mexico and there murdering them had not yet at least been carried into effect.

But it meant hours of agonizing uncertainty. Daylight would have to come before a hunt for this hangout could be organized with any hope of success.

Meanwhile, as Molly and J. P. sat at the hotel in Rio Rita, anxiously awaiting the reports by telephone and messenger from the agents and searchers they had sent scurrying in every direction, the two managed to arrive at a much better understanding.

In broken and disjointed fashion, but with every syllable carrying the undoubted ring of truth, Blair told her of his connection with the irrigation project.

"It starts a long while back," he said. "I guess, the real beginning was, that like a good many other successful men I was fed up on my own success, irked by the very routine and system I had worked so hard to build up.

"Well, about that time Crawford came to the concern, and before long I began to see a good deal of him at my house. Probably, he figured that the quickest way to get at me was by paying attention to my daughter.

"If so, he gained his aim. I fell into the way of talking with him when I met him out at the place. He had ideas and a glib way of expressing them. Plainly he thought Blair & Co. was old-fogeyish, and he made me begin to think so, too.

"Upshot of it was that I decided to try out some of his suggestions. Probably I was in a shape to take up with anything, provided it was new or different.

"Well, I made some money at it. Then came a chance to make a whole lot of money. To do so meant using inferior material on one or two specifications, where the chances were slight that the substitution would ever be found out. But the stumbling block to that was Norman Rich. The filling of contracts was in his hands, and you never could get an idea like that into his bean."

"No," agreed Molly; "you couldn't. So that was the reason you let him out, eh?"

Blair nodded.

"And we lost on the contract after all," he admitted. "Not enough to stagger me exactly, but enough to make

me good and sore, and determined to even up somehow.

"It was a big contract on mining machinery at a place not so awfully far away from here, and the company went broke. I came down to see if I could salvage anything, and hearing that you were starting an irrigation project here in Los Chicos County ran over to find out if you'd need a pumping plant.

"Not a chance, your old surveyor told me, and showed me his plans for a dam. I saw at once he was away off in his figures. But I didn't say anything.

"Instead, I went out and bought the Bridger County plateau for a song, taking title in the name of a dummy. Here was my chance to even up for my losses, I thought.

"Later, I learned that the surveyor's mistake had been discovered," he continued, "and that a plant was to be put in which would deprive Bridger County of any share in the water.

"So I sent Crawford down here to see if he couldn't negotiate for the irrigation of my plateau land; and gave him my power of attorney, and full authority to act in my stead.

"But instead of following my instructions, he used my name and authority to play a crooked game of his own with your grafting local officials by which he plans to defraud you, Miss Todd, and the people of Los Chicos County, and ultimately rob you of your entire estate.

"And the worst of it is," he concluded ruefully, "that unless we can hang the responsibility of this abduction on him, or otherwise prove conspiracy, it looks from what you tell me as if he were going to get away with it.

"Things have gone so far, and he has the matter so thoroughly in his own hands, that I doubt very much if I shall be able to prevent him from carrying it through."

"And I don't know that I'd care very much," Molly smiled wanly, "if only I could be assured that Norman was unhurt, and was coming back to me."

Morning came, and afternoon came, and another night came. And in spite of a vigorous combing of the mountain fastnesses, no trace was turned up of the missing flivver or of the supposedly abducted pair.

Spurred on by the heavy rewards offered by the now almost frantic J. P., practically the entire population of Rio Rita was engaged on the search—boy scouts, business men, doctors and lawyers, even the village seamstress and the village milliner. They all might as well have stayed at home and pursued their ordinary avocations, however, for all that they accomplished.

It began to look to Blair and Molly very much as if their original theory must have been right, and that the couple had been spirited off to Mexico. Certainly, it seemed established, if the searchers were to be believed, that they were nowhere within a radius of twenty miles of Rio Rita.

Yet all the time, a short walk, if it had been known just where to go, would have brought any one to the eagerly sought flivver—or, rather, to what was left of it.

When Norman roused to a dim consciousness from the stupor occasioned by the chloroform, he had a hazy notion that he was on one of those diabolical amusement park devices which are supposed to create enjoyment by tossing one about like a pea on a griddle.

He was being jounced and jolted and pitched from side to side until it seemed that his entire inner mechanism was scrambled.

Then realizing from the touch of the leather cushions and the characteristic snorting of the engine, that he was in the flivver, he gradually worked out from this—reasoning slowly and with periodic lapses into unconsciousness—what was happening to him.

The memory of his seizure came back to him, and he recognized that he was

in the hands of his enemies. His arms and feet were bound, and his head was still muffled in the cloth which had been thrown over him. But this had slipped aside somewhat, giving him a chance to breathe the fresh air.

The roughness of the road they were traversing, and its steady downward slant led him to decide that it must be the short cut to the village.

He remembered Gladys then, and turned quickly to see if she was with him, finding somewhat to his surprise that she was. But he could tell from her stertorous breathing that she was still deeply insensible.

Like Molly, he reasoned that a mistake must have been made in carrying her off, and wondered what Blair would say when he came to find out about it. The fact made him feel easier in regard to his own fate.

They wouldn't dare do anything to him, with the daughter of their chief in his company. He could almost chuckle at their predicament.

Wider and wider awake Norman became. But he cunningly feigned to be still in a stupor until the smoother going and the lights flashing in through the drawn curtains of the car informed him they were passing through Rio Rita. Then he suddenly roused up and let out a yell.

But apparently no one heard him, and before he could repeat the outcry one of the men on the front seat had turned and jammed the muzzle of a revolver into his ribs.

"Another yip like that"—it was Da Silva's voice—"and I'll make dog's meat out of you!"

Norman kept silent. After all, it made small difference, he told himself. He could afford to bide his time until the error in regard to Gladys's identity was discovered. Then he would laugh at them.

But here a thought interposed to give him pause. Da Silva certainly could not have been misled into taking another girl for his former employer. Perhaps, though, Da Silva had not been present when Gladys and himself were seized.

They had left the town behind now, and were on the road to Los Chicos Junction, proceeding at a brisker pace. They stopped for a moment or two—Norman did not understand just why—and then went on again. Just then Gladys, awaking to half-consciousness, gave a wavering scream. But the man in front quickly pressed the cloth down over her face, and she subsided again into insensibility.

Where were they being taken, Norman wondered, and for what purpose? He had not long to wait for his answer. The car turned off from the highway and jolted along over the ties of the railroad track. In a few minutes it had reached the scene of the recent wreck, and stopped there.

Da Silva turned from the wheel and removed the muffling cloths from about the heads of his captives. Then he lighted a cigarette, and held the match up so as to illuminate their faces.

His eyes were gleaming with vindictive triumph.

"The lady sleeps," he murmured in his soft, silky voice, "and perhaps it is just as well. But you are awake, Mr. Rich, and I am glad; for I would not have you miss one of the sensations you are about to experience. Tonight you and I are quits."

Norman only laughed.

"You fool!" he jeered. "Haven't you got it through your thick head yet that you have made a bad mistake? This lady is the daughter of Mr. Blair, your boss and paymaster."

But the Spaniard showed no signs of discomfiture.

"Pho!" He flicked away the burned match. "Blair, eh? Blair means nothing to me. My boss and paymaster is Crawford. He and I worked out this little plan together.

"And believe me, I have made no mistake, Mr. Rich. You think that I intended to carry off Molly Todd, eh?

Oh, no; that will come later. But to-night I preferred to humble her pride and give her heart a twist. Already it is reported at the castle that the man she loves has jilted her and eloped with his old sweetheart."

"Just let me have one hand loose and a chance to get at you!" begged Norman. "One hand is all I ask."

Da Silva laughed.

"Oh, no—that would be giving you a chance; and I have no purpose of doing anything like that. Our clever little plan gives you no chance; for, believing that you two have eloped, no one will look for you.

"Give you a chance? Oh, no, Mr. Rich. All I seek to-night is revenge. Kick me in the stomach, will you? Take that, you dog!"

And doubling his fist, he drove it again and again into the helpless man's body, until Norman was writhing in agony.

Desisting at last, Da Silva got out of the car and stood beside it, laughing. His companion had already alighted and had moved a little distance away.

"And now, friend Rich, I am going to give you and the lady an experience few enjoy, and from which none ever return to tell about—a four-hundred-foot dive off this famed White Horse cliff."

"You fiend!" gasped Norman through his twisted lips. "You would not dare!"

"Oh, yes, I would. Watch me."

With malevolent cruelty and keeping up a running fire of satiric comment, he went about his preparations with maddening slowness.

First he bound Gladys and Norman tightly to the car. Then he started up the engine and let it run tantalizingly for several minutes.

Finally he put the car into motion, and, standing on the running board, drove it forward, but stopped just at the edge of the precipice and, throwing the mechanism into reverse, backed away.

This he repeated several times. But at last he stepped from the running board and let the car go on.

It poised for a second on the brink, then lurched forward. There was a sickening swoop through the air. Crash!

CHAPTER XVI.

FROM BAD TO WORSE.

ON the afternoon following Norman Rich's abduction, while weary searchers straggled in, one after another, only to report a fruitless quest, and Molly and Blair grew steadily more depressed and heartsick over the outlook, Los Chicos County flamed out from end to end with great yellow and black posters.

At every crossroads settlement one encountered them; in front of all the little country post offices; on telegraph poles; plastered against the rocks. The Salem printer had kept his word and billed the territory as for a circus.

And before every poster was gathered a knot of citizens, reading the statements of the manifesto and discussing its various allegations. It ran as follows:

GRAFT! ROBBERY! MURDER!

People of Los Chicos County, Attention!

Do you know that the Irrigation System for which you voted is already a failure?

Your County Commissioners in secret session have so changed the dimensions of the dam now building across Hairpin Cañon that it will never supply a drop of water to Los Chicos County soil.

Also in secret session they have contracted to spend your money for a pumping plant inadequate and totally useless so far as the needs of Los Chicos County are concerned.

The only area which can possibly be benefitted by this dam and pumping plant is the narrow plateau on the Bridger County side of the cañon.

These facts can be readily verified by any one capable of taking measurements and making a simple mathematical calculation.

Since the discovery of these secret alterations in your irrigation system, three separate attempts have been made upon the lives of those who brought them to light and are protesting against them.

Yet your sheriff has arrogantly refused to take any steps to apprehend the murderer or to prevent further attempts of the sort.

WHY? WHY? WHY?

I charge that your corrupt Courthouse Ring, for graft and personal profit, have entered into a gigantic conspiracy with powerful outside interests to divert the benefit of the irrigation system, for which you are paying, to the Bridger County plateau.

Your money will have been spent. The system will be a failure. Your land will have no value.

Then this greedy Gang will gobble up your depreciated acres for a song, restore the dam and pumping plant at a comparatively slight expense to the capacity originally planned, and reap millions.

You pay, and they cash in.

That is the scheme. What are you going to do about it?

(Signed) NORMAN RICH.

It was a smudgy proof of that inflammatory poster which had somehow been smuggled out and got into their hands that had led to that hasty exodus of Crawford and the courthouse crowd the night before.

As they read its sizzling, straight-out accusations, they had seen in anticipation the rising of an enraged citizenry. With unpleasant visions before their eyes of tar and feathers, and ropes and all the paraphernalia of wild mob justice, Mr. Fenton hurriedly closed his undertaking shop, Mr. Creel forsook his garage, Mr. Thornley left his dairy farm, and with Crawford and the sheriff they all scurried across the cañon to the refuge of neutral soil.

The wicked flee where no man pursueth. Big Bill had been shrewder in his diagnosis.

As a matter of fact, the sunbaked, listless inhabitants of the lava hills did not fall into any paroxysms of indignation when they read the poster.

They spelled it out curiously, and, scratching their heads, glanced at one another.

"Well, what do you know about that?" said John Smith to Bill Jones, his neighbor. "S'pose there's anything in it?"

"Shouldn't wonder," drawled Bill in response. "I always said that gang at the courthouse wasn't no better'n burglars. Who's this Norman Rich, anyhow?"

"Oh, he's that feller what's been stoppin' at Molly Todd's. A man from Rio Rita told me he disappeared last night, and they ain't been able to find no trace of him. Likely, the crowd got him."

"That so? Fine doings for a law-abiding community, ain't it? Somep'n ought to be done."

"Sure ought. Fust thing we know, Fenton an' that bunch 'll be walkin' off with the courthouse."

"You said it. Still I never did believe this irrigation business 'd amount to nothin, nohow."

"Me, neither. Just a chance for Molly Todd to snort around and make speeches. Wimmen's place is in the home, I say."

"Right, you are. But there ain't no holdin' 'em down nowadays. Which reminds me that I'll be gittin' scalped if I don't show up pretty soon for supper."

"Same here," said Bill Jones. "Well, s'long." They trudged off to their own affairs.

And the same scene was enacted by dozens of other John Smiths and Bill Joneses throughout the county. It is the way of the world. What is everybody's business is nobody's business.

But the courthouse crowd and Craw-

ford, panic-stricken under the prickings of their own guilty consciences, had not been able to foresee this state of public apathy and indifference.

It required only a glance at the poster to send them bolting. White-faced and trembling, they spent the night in their retreat on the other side of the cañon, anxiously consulting as to how they might save their skins and their scheme.

There seemed no way to avert the threatened explosion. An emissary they had sent hurrying to the Salem printer to try and buy up the run-off of posters, and persuade him to print no more, returned to report that already several hundred copies had been sent to outlying districts of Los Chicos County, and were on display there.

"Well," said Fenton huskily, "that means there ain't no stopping the cyclone. All we can do is to set tight over here, and wait till she blows herself out. 'Twon't take long. Them things always simmers down. Then we can go back, and see what chance there is of pacifyin' 'em."

"Yes," spoke up Crawford, struck by an idea. "But in the meantime, how do we know what damage will be done? Finding us gone, aren't they apt to wreak their fury on the dam?

"Suppose they destroy what has been done, where are we going to find fresh funds to start in over again?"

Fenton scratched his nose at this suggestion.

"Seems like, under the circumstances, Blair 'll have to shell out a bit," he ventured.

"Blair?" Crawford sneered derisively. "You might as well learn now as any other time that Blair isn't in this, and never has been. I've only been using his name to string you suckers along.

"No, Blair is very much on the other side, and he'll be more so now, after what has happened to his daughter."

This naturally created an angry diversion. But Crawford only jeered at them for having been so credulous as to believe that there could be such a thing as honor among thieves.

"I was playing my own game with you, of course," he confessed coolly; "not Blair's, nor yours, nor anybody else's. And now there's no use crying over spilled milk. You swallowed my bait, and you're in this thing with me up to your eyebrows, and you've got to pull along with me whether you want to or not.

"So, let's can all this chatter, and decide what we're going to do about protecting the dam. For I tell you frankly that if these hoodlums bust up the work that's been already done, we may as well kiss our whole deal goodby. There'll be no money to start in over again."

This sobered them down. To have gone through all this turmoil and risk, only to have their dreams of plunder end in smoke! That was unthinkable.

Finally, it was determined after considerable discussion that the sheriff must organize a special force of so-called deputies to guard the dam until the Governor could be appealed to and troops sent to quell the expected outbreak.

But since on this occasion, he would be opposed by the people of his own bailiwick, it would be necessary for him to recruit a force of mercenaries from among the residents of Bridger County.

He hurried out, and by spending the rest of the night in hard riding, managed to gather up by morning a hundred fighting men, willing to take on the job at three dollars a day.

By noon they commenced in twos and threes to straggle in toward the cañon—one-time Mexican revolutionaries who had fought under Villa and Zapata and had later drifted across the border, others who bore a pretty well authenticated reputation as bandits and cattle rustlers, also a sprinkling of toughs and rum runners from the na-

tive stock—a hard-bitten, lawless, desperate crew, capable of anything.

About four o'clock, at the time when he expected the wave of popular indignation over Norman's poster to rise to mob violence, the sheriff deployed his little army down the side of the cañon, and took possession of the dam.

But he made the serious mistake of giving no notice to his own constituents of his purpose or intentions.

Los Chicos County heard that a Bridger County mob had seized upon the bend in the cañon, and naturally supposed it was for the object of taking over the disputed ground by force.

The rumor spread, exaggerated as all rumors are in the telling. Reports of depredations and killings gained currency. Rio Rita blazed up into white heat over the outrage. The news was telephoned to all the outlying districts.

And then the John Smiths and Bill Joneses, who had dismissed so carelessly the news that they were being exploited and despoiled by a set of grafters, each grabbed his weapon, and with blood in his eye started for the dam.

This was different. This was the invasion of their soil, the outbreaking of an ancient feud. They were ready to fight.

So by nightfall shots were again flashing out across the cañon, and the war once more was on.

Big Bill brought the news to Molly where she sat at the hotel, still vainly hoping for some word from the searchers. But she paid little attention to it. Her mind was all wrapped up in one subject.

She had been reading over Norman's poster which some one had brought in to her, and she lifted her eyes from it, heavy with grief and sleepless vigil.

"See!" she pointed to his name at the foot of the poster. "When he signed that, he signed his own death warrant. Oh, why didn't some of us stop him? Why didn't we prevent it?

"They have killed him, I feel sure now. He is dead. I have no longer any hope."

And she buried her head in her hands in a tempest of weeping.

But Molly was in error. Norman was not dead. Miracles do still sometimes happen, and he had been the subject of one. Or else it was that, like a cat, he was endowed with nine lives. For somehow both he and Gladys had survived that appalling plunge over the brink of White Horse Cliff.

In the first place, it must be understood that the descent was not so sheer as it appeared from the top looking downward. There were ledges and outcroppings projecting from the face of the cliff all the way down, which served in some measure to check the fall.

The flivver struck the first of these not more than twenty feet down, and was slewed off by it to a sort of slanting slope along which it coasted, rather than fell, to strike another ledge; and so, by a series of interrupted drops and slides, finally crashed into the heaped-up wreckage of the railroad train at the bottom.

And here again luck was with them; for the tumbling vehicle dropped, as if it had been aimed, directly into a V-shaped opening between two up-ended box cars, and thus was saved a bit the full force of the impact.

Yet all that serves to minimize but little the greatness of the miracle. That any one should have crashed from such a height, and live to tell the tale, would seem incredible, were it not that one is able to recall similar astounding escapes from an even greater elevation by lucky airplanists.

And in that broken, bent, twisted heap of scrap, Norman and Gladys remained alive — alive, but little more. For almost twenty-four hours they lay there with only their faint, labored respiration, or an occasional spasmodic twitch of the eyelids to indicate that they were not dead.

When Norman, struggling back to

a dim consciousness, finally opened his eyes, the first thing that caught his vision was the thin crescent of a new moon dropping toward the western horizon.

It puzzled his exact and logical soul as things began to come back to him. He could not make the time of his being pushed off the cliff coincide with the hour for the setting of a new moon.

But when, at last, he had figured out that a full day must have passed over him, and it must now be another night, he had other and more important matters to occupy his attention.

The first of these was a consuming thirst. Realizing by this time that he must somehow have survived that dive from the top of the cliff—a fact on which he had been a bit doubtful at first—and also that he must now be at the bottom of it, he began to think longingly of that cool stream which threaded the cañon.

But at the first effort he made to seek it, he fell back again, faint and giddy from the pain the attempt cost him. He was a mass of bruises and abrasions, and his right leg was fractured between the knee and the ankle, he discovered.

The cords which had bound him to the car were still on him; but as the parts of the framework to which they had been tied were all broken away, they would not have hampered his movements, except for his physical disabilities.

Up to this time—and it was really only in the last minute or two that he had been clearly conscious, he had entertained no question but that Gladys had been killed.

It startled him, therefore, to hear her give a sigh, and note as he turned toward her that she was making a slight effort to lift her head.

Biting his lips until they bled to conquer the agony it cost him, Norman freed himself from the cords on his limbs, and finding two pieces of the car's chassis which would serve him as canes, dragged himself laboriously out over the wreckage to the stream, returning with about a pint of water in a bent piece of tin.

Dabbing her face with this, he eventually succeeded in restoring her to consciousness, and was rejoiced to find that—probably owing to her limp, insensible state—she had come through the ordeal better than himself, for her injuries were confined to mere scratches and a general shaking up.

Indeed, it was not long before she was sitting up, and able, under his direction, to help him set his broken leg and bind it up with makeshift splints.

Meanwhile, she questioned naturally the possibilities of escape from their predicament. The new moon meant nothing to her. She had no idea but that it was the same night of their adduction, and was certain that her father, in his anxiety, must be already conducting a search for her.

Norman did not undeceive her. What use to tell her that a day had already passed away, or that Crawford's stratagem of representing their absence as an elopement had probably precluded any effort to hunt for them.

What use to tell, either, that they were in a sort of pocket in the cañon, with its sheer walls narrowing to the stream both above and below them, and egress in either direction so difficult that in their disabled condition it would be impossible for them to make it.

It was this unapproachable character of the place that had prevented the railroad company from any attempt to salvage its freight and rolling stock piled up at the foot of the cliff as a result of the wreck, that, and perhaps another reason which made itself evident later.

But it was time enough for Gladys to discover these hazards of their situation when she came up against them. Why frighten her now in her weak, shaken state by disclosing to her that they were cut off from the world as

much as if they were stranded on a desert island.

Chance might lead somebody to the edge of the cliff to see them and render assistance. But it was about the same chance as that of sighting a sail on an untraveled, lonely ocean. And meanwhile they were helpless, destitute of all the necessities of life except water.

Hunger had not come yet, but by tomorrow they would begin to feel it. And there was nothing for them to eat.

"Wouldn't some one hear us and come, if we called?" asked the girl.

He shook his head. A mere waste of breath. Their feeble cries would be swallowed up in the depths of the cañon, only to be hurled back at them in mocking echoes from the cliffs.

"But if we lighted a fire, it might be seen," she suggested.

He had already thought of that; but —alas!—although he had turned out every corner of his pockets, he was unable to find even a splinter of a match.

"And I am cold," she whimpered.

So was he, shivering, for the wind that swept through the cañon after nightfall was nipping. All he could do was put his coat around her and offer her the shelter of a fairly intact box car, reasoning that this would serve also as a sort of protection against mountain lions, or other prowling beasts.

"I'll tell you, Gladys," he said. "We'd better make ourselves as comfortable as we can here to-night; and in the morning, when daylight comes, I'll try to figure some way out of the mess. I'm not much of a woodman; but maybe I can find a flint and steel, and—

"What was that?" he broke off, startled; for down the cañon on the wind was borne the sharp report of firing.

Fusillade after fusillade they listened to, Norman trying to puzzle what it could be about. Evidently a battle was raging, stubborn and vindictive. Then, after an hour or so, the volleys from the Los Chicos bank dwindled in volume, grew fainter, finally died away. Apparently the forces on that side had been either defeated or driven back.

Long before this happened, though, Gladys, worn out by shock and the mental strain of it all, had fallen asleep. Norman, with the throbbing in his leg and his worry over the situation, could not succumb so easily.

At last he, too, was nodding off, when suddenly he was startled into full wakefulness by hearing voices and the sound of footsteps outside their retreat.

For a moment, he thought he must be dreaming. Then he caught the gleam of a flash light through the cracks of the box car, and shoving back its sliding door, called loudly.

There was no response. Instead, the flash light was quickly extinguished and the noise of voices and footsteps ceased.

Norman dragged himself painfully over to the aperture and leaned out.

"Help!" he shouted. "Whoever you are, for God's sake, come to us. We are Norman Rich and Gladys Blair, helpless and injured."

There was a startled gasp from the darkness. Then the flash light was turned on again, and with a low, vindictive laugh Da Silva, followed by Crawford, stepped out of the shadows in which they had been hiding.

CHAPTER XVII.

WHEN CHAOS CAME.

"WONDERS will never cease!" There was a note almost of incredulity in Da Silva's silky voice, as he played the flash light curiously on Norman's face. "To think that you could have gone over White Horse Cliff, and not be smashed into bits.

"And little Gladys, too, you say? Let me see." He swung the ray beyond Norman so as to illumine the interior of the box car.

"Ah! Sleeping as usual? What a little dormouse she is. But this time we will make no mistake, eh, Crawford?" He turned to his companion. "We will put them bye-o for keeps." He took out his revolver and toyed significantly with it.

Norman knew better than to appeal for mercy to that pitiless soul.

"Crawford," he pleaded, "you can't go on with this. You can't stand there, and let him butcher us in cold blood. At least, save Gladys. She has never done you any harm."

Crawford hesitated, but shook his head.

"Sorry," he muttered. "I have no liking for such business, but I can't help myself. Why the devil didn't you get out, Rich, when you were warned? You had no call to stick your nose into all this, but you would do it.

"Now it's you or me."

He seemed to be trying to work himself up into a proper frame of indignation to see the thing through.

"But Gladys, Crawford?" Norman appealed again. "Surely you will spare her? Surely—"

"No!" Crawford snapped. "She knows too much. It's you two or me, I tell you. Self preservation."

He mumbled something else along the same line, and mopped his face unsteadily with his handkerchief. Evidently the strain of the thing was telling on him.

"Good Lord!" he snarled suddenly at Da Silva. "Don't look so darned happy. Don't the fix of these poor devils touch you at all? Why the dickens couldn't you have ended the mess the other night, instead of dragging me into a scene like this?

"It's all your blundering that brought me here anyhow," he rasped. "No necessity for it, if you hadn't told me of tieing them into the car, and so leaving definite proof that it was a murder and not an accident. And then when I come to help you straighten out your silly mistake, I slam into this!"

Norman's brain, working overtime, caught a ray of hope from his grumbling.

"Listen, Crawford!" he cried sharply. "If it's murder proofs that you're afraid of, what clearer ones can there be than to have us shot, or killed in any other way?

"I warn you, that if you turn me over to this butcher, I'll put up a struggle which will show that there was no accident. In fact," he voiced a desperate fiction, "I've already left a message that will be found, telling of Da Silva's villainy and yours in hurling us over the cliff."

"Where is it?" demanded Da Silva threateningly.

"Where you would never think of looking for it. But it will be found. I wrote it, thinking I might never escape from here, and I wanted to let the world know what had happened."

The suggestion obviously gave the two miscreants pause; for they drew a little apart, and consulted in low tones. Once Norman heard Crawford raise his voice in protest.

"No," he said querulously. "No gun play, I tell you. And no knife work, either. He's right about it. Certain murder proof of that sort would put both our necks in the noose."

Their voices sank again as Da Silva broke in upon him, and for a considerable time they argued back and forth, while Norman, crouching at the door of the box car, watched them and waited in suspense.

But at last Crawford seemed to have been overborne in their contention, whatever it was.

"All right. Have it your own way." He flung up his hands. "But I'll not wait to see it. You'll have to put it through by yourself."

And without even a glance backward

at the box car or its occupants, he turned, and with bent head hurried away through the underbrush up the cañon.

His action gave a sense of grisly apprehension to Norman which was not lessened by the air of exultant malevolence with which the Spaniard came mincing back toward him.

"You certainly play in hard luck, Friend Rich." He lighted a cigarette and tossed away the match into a heap of wreckage. "Everything goes wrong for you.

"You do not know, perhaps, that your Los Chicos County friends have been driven back in a battle we have just had at the dam, and that the Court House Crowd is in full control. Before they can be ousted, State troops now on the way will be here, and the outbreak will quiet down of course, and they be back in full power.

"Yes," he continued reflectively, "you play in hard luck. You have given us quite a run for our money. But in the end you lose everything.

"What good does it do you to escape from me three times, and to fall over White Horse Cliff and still live, when at the last you go out like this." He blew a puff of smoke from his cigarette and watched it as it vanished, carried away by the breeze.

"Like that!" he repeated, with a venomous laugh. "There will be no murder proofs, Friend Rich, and your message, which I think is scratched somewhere on this wreckage, will never be found. For—you see that little blaze creeping up where I flicked my match—the wreckage will not be here. It and you will have vanished in smoke."

It was just about this time that Big Bill, disheveled and downcast and with a bullet scrape across the temple, came in to report to Molly the repulse of the Bill Joneses and John Smiths at the dam.

"Those devils on the other side are fighters, no mistake about that," he conceded ruefully. "They've druv us back, and now they're intrenched behind the concrete of the dam, where we can't dislodge 'em. If we could only come up the cañon, and take 'em in flank, we might do something; but there ain't no chance of that.

"You see," he explained, "these ain't Bridger County boys at all, but trained greaser guerillas, what was hired by our own sheriff and commissioners.

"Oh, yes," he replied to her quick glance of inquiry. "We've found that out. Fenton and the rest of 'em's been seen mixing with the men on the other side. Fine note, ain't it? Hiring greasers to shoot down their own people!"

Like a flash, Molly had thrown off the apathy with which she had been listening to him, and sprang to her feet with blazing eyes.

"Those assassins! Those murderers!" she exclaimed. "Are those the people you are fighting against? And you are letting them whip you?"

"Can't help ourselves," muttered Big Bill. "Trained soldiers against amachoors."

But she was paying no heed to him. She was thinking rapidly.

"Listen!" she cried. "I've got it! Start a feint attack upon these Mexicans to keep them occupied, and in the meanwhile bring me here a force of about a hundred picked men, that I can lead up the cañon past White Horse Cliff, and take them in flank."

"Past White Horse Cliff?" Big Bill stared at her. "Good gosh, ma'am! It can't be done."

"It can!" She stamped her foot impatiently. "I know a secret path that leads into that pocket below the cliff, and out again. My father showed it to me when I was a little girl. Now don't stand arguing with me, but get your men."

Ten minutes later in hastily commandeered vehicles of every description the hundred men were hurrying

out the junction trail. It was like the advance of the taxicab army that defended Paris. And Molly in her roadster was at the head of them.

Down in that inclosed pit formed by the somber cliffs, Da Silva took a final puff of his cigarette, and tossed it away.

"Like that," he repeated. "You will vanish in smoke."

The blaze from the flicked away match was growing larger, as it caught fresh fuel among the wreckage. It flamed up suddenly, and threw a lurid glare into the box-car.

Da Silva ostentatiously pocketed his revolver, and stood watching it.

Norman caught the ominous significance of his action.

"But surely you are going to shoot us first?" he gasped. "You could not—"

"Ah, no." The Spaniard shrugged. "Even burned bones might show the marks of bullet holes. Me? I take no chances. You will stay where you are, and burn."

A shrill, terrified scream rang out from the back of the box-car. Gladys had awakened, and heard him.

But Da Silva paid no attention to her. Frowningly, he had noticed that the wind was blowing the blaze away from that part of the wreckage where his victims were held.

"I must build another fire in the back," he muttered, and glided away around the end of the car.

Norman reached over, and gripped Gladys's hand.

"Now is your chance!" he whispered. "Run! Run! And hide yourself in the cañon as best you can."

"And you?" She hesitated half an instant.

"I will follow. Go!"

She waited for no more, but with fear lending her wings, leaped to the ground and flew off along the line of the stream.

Da Silva came pelting around the end of the car, and saw her just as she dived into a patch of underbrush. He jerked out his gun and aimed it, but reconsidered.

"I can get her when I want her," he sneered. "But first, I will make sure of you. My new fire is burning briskly."

Norman looking past him, saw Gladys creeping along the bank above the wreckage, evidently with some vain idea of scaling the cliff.

He formed his hands into a trumpet and shouted to her.

"Gladys! Gladys! Get down and run the other way for your life! Dynamite in this wreck!"

Not only Gladys, but Da Silva heard the warning. Instantly, the killer's bravado vanished. He turned and scurried like a rabbit toward the upper entrance of the cañon.

Norman swung himself out of the box-car and with his improvised canes started to hobble away. But even with all the speed he could make, his progress was terribly slow.

And all the time the fire was gaining greater headway.

He saw people approaching from the lower end of the cañon, with Molly Todd at their head. She saw him at the same moment, and started running toward him.

"Back!" he shouted, stopping to wave his arms to her in warning. "Back! I tell you—"

In one single moment, Hairpin Cañon was dammed by a barrier greater and more substantial than any that man could have erected, and by one single stroke the success of Molly's irrigation system was assured.

But, of course, Norman Rich knew nothing of this until later. He fully understood only on his wedding day a month later when Molly took him from the hospital and showed him water running in the irrigation ditches, and the arid soil of Los Chicos County already beginning to sprout with green.

THE END

A Swell Hiding Place

By GORDON STILES

The amazing catch found in a net spread to trap burglars following a series of thefts that set a town by the ears

CHIEF of Police Napoleon Burden—better known as Poley—leaned back in his chair, caught either thumb under the corresponding strap of his red "galluses" and rendered—facially speaking—an excellent imitation of a person about to indulge in apoplexy.

A stranger, coming upon him at that moment, would have dashed for the water cooler if there had been one on the premises. As it was, the only cooler in the vicinity consisted of two dismal brick cells, located directly under the spot occupied by Chief Burden.

An intimate, which term might apply to any one of the two thousand souls that made up the normal population of Green Ridge, Vermont, would have glanced from the purpling face of the peace officer to the damp copy of the *Democrat,* which lay on the deal table, and he would have understood. Of late, Thursday—when the two rival sheets, the *Democrat* and the *Republican,* made their appearance—had been a difficult time for Poley. But perhaps the best explanation of the foregoing lies in the item appearing in a front page box and obviously written by Clem Pitts, editor of the *Democrat:*

HOW LONG MUST WE BEAR THIS BURDEN?

For the fifth time in as many weeks, robbers have been at work in Green Ridge! On Sunday afternoon or evening—it appears to be all the same to the daring thieves—Mrs. Joyce Bittles of New York, was robbed of a valuable diamond and sapphire necklace. The article apparently was taken from her jewel case while her several domestic employees and four week-end guests were in the house or on the grounds!

This incident, we fully expect, will take its place along with those which have gone before on the growing list of "Unsolved Crimes."

Still, it might be interesting to hear Chief Burden's alibi; each one is better than the last!

Seriously, it is about time the town should realize that a good Republican does not necessarily make a good, or even a fair, police officer; expert, long-distance training courses notwithstanding. Beyond which it is clear that such happenings do not tend to increase our highly appreciated summer population.

The score to date:

A. B. Foskett, emerald ring; Miss Gloria Dunn, gold and enamel locket; Mrs. Dewey, platinum chain; Mr. Goddard, gold cigar lighter; and now Mrs. Bittles, diamond and sapphire necklace.

It would give the *Democrat* much pleasure to be able to scratch off some of the above items, and we look to Mr. Burden to make this possible. We are beginning to fear, however, that we shall look in vain!

Chief Poley pulled a huge plug of tobacco out of his hip pocket, bit into it viciously.

"Damn skunk!" he rumbled. "He'll keep on printin' them lists ev'ry week now; thinks it's a dang smart trick, he does! I'd like to—" Mr. Burden glanced at the massive Colt's forty-five that lay on the corner of his desk.

Finally he reached languidly for the *Republican,* quite prepared for the weak defense which its editor, Ernie Willets, would, as a matter of form and politics, put up in the chief's behalf. There it was, to be sure. Good as any, a plea for two more assistants during the summer months.

In the winter, it pointed out, Chief Burden was quite capable of enforcing law and order single-handed. But the single aid, Jim Creeper, allowed him during June, July and August, had his hands full with traffic alone, what with that bad corner by the bridge and all.

Poley shrugged, mopped his perspiring forehead and reached for his official tunic. This he grudgingly donned, fastening the top button only. He put on a hip holster and with worn blue cap at a somewhat dejected angle, passed into the sultry heat of an August morning.

As he walked toward the post office, he tried to throw out his jaw with a forbidding belligerence, to ward off, as it were, the gibes that had become his portion since certain unknown criminals had begun playing fast and loose in Green Ridge.

As ill luck would have it, Clem Pitts was in the post office and the old guard of hangers-on grinned with expectancy when the two men faced each other.

"'Lo, chief," greeted Clem. "How's all the nice little burglars, this mornin'? You'd oughter have a coopful by this time—way they're carryin' on! Hey?"

"They's enough hot air 'round this mornin' without y'r openin' y'r face," Poley told him. "Another thing; you spring any more o' that trainin' course business, an' I'll hev' ya up f'r libel. Danged if I don't! I never took one o' them courses in my life!"

"That so?" jeered Pitts, as he passed out. He called back: "Then if I was you, by gosh, I would!"

Poley choked down the anger that shook him, and scowled hard at those who dawdled near. He secured the morning's mail and examined it on the spot.

A couple of circulars of wanted men, that was all. He then went on to the bridge to see how Jim Creeper was making it with the traffic.

"Somebody oughter push Clem Pitts's teeth down his throat, boss," Jim told him.

"Don't I know it?" Poley returned bitterly.

"It's gosh darned funny, though," went on Jim, "that they don't seem to be no clew in any o' them cases. Slick as grease, them babies are, I'll say."

"Trouble is, ain't no way o' tellin'

who to check up on. 'Them crooks is livin' here as city people. You c'n bet on that. And the way they git theirselves up now'days, they might be the respectablest out of all the sixteen, eighteen hund'ed that's here."

"At that, they might come over from Tom's Lake. Thirty mile ain't much."

"No. It ain't. You better keep y'r eyes peeled f'r any car that drives in here frequent—I mean that you ain't sure belongs to some o' the folks here. Kinda watch out that way, Jim. I'm goin' t' try t' figger things out. We gotta land them devils."

"All right, chief," Jim said, and Poley withdrew.

II.

POLEY forthwith repaired to his home, a small frame cottage on the edge of town where was ample space for garden and chickens, to say nothing of a decent orchard on the hillside behind the dwelling. There was a workshop, too, in the barn. And here, during the winter months, Poley reconditioned furniture.

In this pursuit he drew a good clientele from among the city folk who would leave chairs and tables, damaged in the summer, to be restored against the next season.

Myra Burden, past middle age and matronly enough to satisfy even a body of female reformers, looked at her husband with something of concern. She knew what Thursday had come to mean and always was ready with the comfort which her denunciation of Clem Pitts brought to Poley.

To-day as he handed her the papers without comment, she began: "Well, what has the snapping little poodle dog got to say for himself this week?"

Poley almost smiled. "That's jes' what he is—a snappin' little poodle dog! You got him right, Myra, you have."

Her ample cheeks flushed as she read. "Don't you care, Poley," she said. "You'll show the little snip up yet."

"You know how I gotta do that, don't you?" he asked.

She nodded. "You've got to nab the thieves. You know and I know that Clem Pitts don't amount to a hill of beans. But there's a lot of people who don't. So the only way to put him in his place is to lead him up to the lock-up and show him a real, live burglar."

"That's what. Wal, this afternoon I'm goin' over the ground again. They must be somethin' to go on, somewheres."

"You'll get 'em, Poley," she said confidently. "I know you will. I got new apple pie for dinner."

Poley went over the ground thoroughly enough. But it would have taxed a far more astute brain than his to glean anything from the barren soil in which he worked.

No unusual sounds had been heard in any of the houses visited; no strangers had been observed in the neighborhood. No telltale articles had been dropped by the rogue or rogues, and nothing had been marred by jimmy or chisel. No clews.

It was several days later, when Chief Burden had about given up all hope and was breathlessly awaiting a fresh defiance of his authority that he chanced upon what appeared to be the hottest of hot tips!

Scraps of paper with writing on them were, it is fair to assume, no less interesting to Poley than to most human beings. Thus, when he literally stumbled upon a half sheet of letter paper, evidently let fall at the public desk of the post office, the chief without hesitation picked it up and acquainted himself with its contents.

Which, it may be said, were brief and startling. Especially to Mr. Burden.

Apparently the thing was part of a letter; it had been detached and the

balance was missing. Possibly, Poley thought, the holder had kept the wrong bit. With popping eyes, he read:

> —because the old mill tower had served us before and it is not too far from Welliver's. I am glad Welliver's was picked, there ought to be a percentage there. The gang will be pleased. As long as the mill is the wind-up, it will be only natural that something in the line of a celebration should be pulled off at Tripper's. We'll meet there, at any rate. Meantime, you need not worry about my letting anything drop; an oyster is a roarin' fool, stacked up against me. Wednesday night at Tripper's, I'll have an earful for you—

"Whew!" ejaculated Poley and crinkles stirred up and down his spine.

He glanced at his watch. Wednesday night! It was practically that already—half past six!

What luck! Here he was in possession of the plans of a desperate gang to rob the rich Welliver home, within a few hours, too! The old tower of the disused Flecker woolen mill on Bearcat Creek named as a rendezvous! Gosh! He must step fast!

It might well be that other robberies were to be pulled off simultaneously. Yes, they probably intended to do several jobs and meet at the mill to exchange reports, check up on things. Then on to Tripper's road house for their celebration!

Poley considered. He dare not broadcast the news. The gangsters most certainly would be warned off if he did so. He wanted to catch them red-handed, Furthermore, he wanted the glory himself.

He would show that upstart, Clem Pitts, a thing or two. He would swear in some deputies right away and form a plan.

The robbers who should visit Welliver's must be caught in the act. The others could be picked up either at the mill or at Tripper's; he guessed the mill would be the best bet.

Fred Carney, the town clerk, entered the office at that moment. With instinctive generalship, Poley buttonholed him.

"Fred," he said, "I gotta swear you in as deputy cop. I can do it, you know, under the town by-laws."

Fred nodded. "Sure you can. What's the row?"

"First," resumed Poley, "you take the oath."

He proceeded to repeat the formula enjoining, among other things, absolute, unquestioned obedience to the chief's orders.

Fred swore to all of it.

"My first order is to keep your mouth shut!" Poley told his ally. "Next, you go down to Welliver's. Stick around there an' keep your eyes peeled. I got a tip somethin's goin' to be pulled off there to-night. You get on the job; take your gun. I'll have a couple more fellers down there with you 'fore many minutes. But I want t' git certain points covered right away. Savvy?"

"Yes. But—say! Well, you better get those boys down mighty quick."

"Sure I will. Nothin' won't happen f'r hours, I guess. But I ain't takin' no chances. See?"

"All right. I'm on my way. Hurry up yourself!"

"I will," said Poley. "Ha!" He had spotted Clem Pitts through the open door and a delicious idea was born in that instant. He ran out on the heels of the departing Fred and hailed his enemy.

"Come here, Pitts," he commanded. "I wanta see you."

"Oh, so?" answered Pitts, languidly. "What you got on your mind, chief. Burglar catching yarn for the paper? Time's short."

"Yours 'll be, if you don't close your trap an' listen to me. I'm swearin' you in as deputy under the town by-laws. Get that? You know the oath, but I'll run through it. Stick up your mitt now. You swear? All O. K. My first order is to keep your mouth

shut an' do what I tell you. You got a gun?"

"Ye-e-ss. In the office. What's it—"

"Git that gun. See it's loaded. Then you do a quick ramble up to Flecker's mill tower. Jes' plant yourself in there an' if anybody shows up, no matter who 'tis, you keep 'em there."

"B-b-but!"

"No buts. You're a-howlin' all th' time f'r the law t' do wonders. Now's y'r chanst t' help. You needn't fret, though. I'll be roun' there in half an hour or so. I got a coupla places t' cover first. So you sit tight in the mill till I show up."

Pitts had no choice, and he took himself off, well aware that he would be under Poley's eye until he should be well on his way to the mill.

The chief watched him go. Then set out to round up Jim Creeper. He chuckled at the eerie assignment he had handed Clem Pitts.

III.

Not knowing what it was all about, but with his ancient thirty-two caliber nickel-plated revolver—which he never had fired at all—clutched in his right hand under cover of his coat pocket, the editor of the *Democrat* made his way to the designated spot.

The site of the Flecker mill was not a cheerful place even by daylight. It lay almost half a mile from the center of the town, in the glowering shadow of a wooded mountain. And since its abandonment as a commercial factor, a mass of young growth had sprung up about it so that, save for occasional pairs of hardy lovers, few persons ever visited the ruin.

Now, dusk had settled over the gloomy tower, and Pitts shuddered a little as he picked his way gingerly along the remnants of a path leading to the sagging door.

"Ugh!" he muttered. "What sort of a game is this, anyhow? Wonder why he sent me here? I don't trust him."

He drew out his gun as he approached the entrance. Even if Burden did say that nothing would happen for awhile, he did not intend to be caught napping. He cocked the revolver and held it ungracefully before him as his foot touched the rotting wood.

At the same instant a slight sound caught his ear! It came from inside—directly in front of him, in the pitchy darkness of the damp smelling interior!

Pitts's heart seemed to stop beating, his vitals to freeze. His scalp felt suddenly tight and the hand holding the gun shook like a leaf. There was a terriffic roar, followed by an exclamation—something sharp that burned and bit struck Pitts in the face!

His head flew back, knocked against a timber, and he sank to the floor, half stunned! He felt his assailant brush past him into the outer air!

Staggering to his feet, still clutching the gun he had inadvertently discharged, thus bringing upon himself the wrath of his unseen foe, Pitts rushed into the open.

He put his hand to his face and drew it away soaked with blood. How seriously he was injured he did not know, terror-crazed, half whimpering, he ran for it!

To the nearest drug store he dashed. Oblivious to the few staring customers in the place—it was supper time—he sank down on top of a five gallon carboy of ammonia that stood in the rear.

"How bad am I hurt, Pete?" he gasped.

Pete Winch, the proprietor, thoroughly astounded, picked up the gun Pitts had dropped on the floor, laid it away behind the counter and gave his attention to the injury.

"Not bad," he said after a few seconds. "Just a flesh wound. How'd you come by it?"

While Pete bound a bunch of gauze over the damaged spot, Pitts mumbled

incoherent bits about a "frame up" at the old mill—a frame up engineered by Chief Burden himself! Boiling with rage, muttering wild threats, the editor hastened to his house, leaving the street to put what interpretation it would upon what it had witnessed and heard.

This last was plenty and various, and in a remarkably short space of time Poley Burden knew that his journalistic deputy had been the victim of some sort of encounter at the mill. Which not only puzzled him, but dashed his hopes of rounding up the criminals who had made life miserable for so many weeks.

Hastily, Poley took counsel with Ernie Willets, Postmaster Steele, and Jim Creeper. He explained the letter as he understood it, and discovered that they concurred. Also they agreed that he had been forced to act quickly.

No criticism there. It had just so happened that some one of the bandits had gone to the mill ahead of time.

"You'd better get right up and see Clem," Willets counseled. "He'll go after you to-morrow worse than ever. Tell how you sent him on a job you didn't dare tackle yourself and all that."

"That's right," admitted Poley. "I'll go over there now." They all went along.

As near as they could understand the message delivered by Mrs. Pitts, Clem had said: "You tell that old crook to go to hell! I'll have plenty to say later on. Tell him he'd better get out of town before he's run out, the dirty old framing sneak!" That was the substance of it.

"The blamed fool," was Poley's comment. "S'pose we slip over t' the mill an' see kin we dig up any light on why that feller was there. He might have left somethin' behind, gittin' out quick, like that."

There was considerable delay. Electric torches had to be procured, and the extra members expressed a desire to go armed. Also, Jim Creeper was dispatched to advise Fred Carney of what was going forward and to receive his report, if any.

Jim returned to say that all was well at the Welliver house, and Jim had seen two carloads of guests drive up while he conferred with Fred.

Half sick with disappointment, Poley led his party to the mill. They approached quietly, showing no lights, groped their way through the moldering portal, halted a moment and listened before turning on their torches. And in that brief moment plenty happened.

A motor, swiftly driven, screeched to a stop at the end of the path leading from the highway to the tower. Footsteps hurried toward the ruin.

The group in the dark tower held their breath. Their straining ears caught excited words, a woman's voice above all things!

Poley heard her say, "We're first! We're first! I told you so!"

A male voice rumbled: "Guess you're right. Say! Whoever picked Welliver's knew his onions. I can taste that cocktail yet."

"The cool devils!" muttered Poley to himself. "They've pulled their stunt right under Fred's nose and helped themselves to cocktails to boot. Slick birds. Here you! Hands up! Quick!"

Three flash lights showed a man and a girl, dressed in approved evening regalia! With frightened eyes and drooping jaws they stared at their captors.

The man recovered himself quickly.

"What is it, a stick-up?" he inquired. "We haven't got much but—"

"Hold your tongue," ordered Poley. "We're police and you're pinched."

"P-p-pinched?" faltered the girl. "What for?"

"Plenty," Poley said. "Robbin' Welliver's, for one thing. What did you git down there? Hand it over."

The young man, now at ease, laughed. "I got a jolly good shot of liquor, but I'm blessed if I'm going to hand it over. On the level, officer, we're not gunmen or anything like that. There must be some mistake about it."

"I admit y' don't look like crooks," Poley told him. "But that don't mean nothin'. Who be ye, if y' care t' say an' are prepared to prove it? An' what be ye doin' here?"

"We're from Tom's Lake and we're on a treasure hunt?"

"Treasure hunt! That stacks up with what I thought. Here! Jes' keep them han's up. What d'ye mean, treasure hunt?"

The young man burst out laughing.

"You tell him, Jo," he bade the girl.

Whereupon the young woman briefly and concisely explained the principles of that exciting pastime. She finished with: "We ought to be able to prove it, because I think this is where the treasure lies—two hundred dollars in gold. Will you let me look, Mr. Officer? Please! Because the others will be along any minute, and we want to win."

"Go ahead. But mind y'r step. I've got my eye on ye."

Under the flash lights, the gold prize presently came to light, neatly hidden in a pocket behind a beam. None too soon, either, for two more cars flashed up, each disgorging a girl and her escort. The losers wailed and the winners exulted.

And it was while this was going on that Jim Creeper proved himself the worthy assistant Poley had hoped he would be. "A swell place to hide that there treasure," Jim had murmured, idly running his hand along the pocket where the gold coins had lain. "Gosh! What's this?"

Before their astonished eyes, he drew out a handful of miscellaneous jewelry—a collection that Poley instantly recognized would check quite accurately with Editor Pitts's famous list. But Jim seemed not so much impressed by that as by something else he held in his hand—something that presently caused him to burst into loud guffaws.

"Oh, gorry!" he yelled. "This is a dandy. I kin see it all's plain as day, now. See them!"

He held aloft two black feathers.

"Looks like part of a crow's tail," Poley offered.

"An' that's jes' what it is, too. Part of that pet crow of Doc Shultz's! You know him, Poley."

"Sure do," said Poley. "Say! Say! By the Lord Harry!"

"Can't you see him?" demanded Jim. "Can't you git it all. Summer time—windows open—the doc's crow great collector of shiny things. Finds a swell place to hide them, roosts by 'em nights. Up sneaks Pitts—crow says 'urk' or somethin' an' Clem blazes away. Naturally he's li'ble t' git a bite took outen his mush! Oh, gorry! Har! Har! Har!"

And echo, aided by numerous voices, answered, "Har! Har! Har!"

To this day, Poley has the original drawing that appeared in the following week's *Republican*. Editor Pitts, wildly discharging a blunderbuss into the air, while a splendid likeness of Dr. Shultz's pet centers a stunning attack on the aggressor's left cheek.

Title: A Certain Editor Discovers Clews—and Claws!

THE END

Next week's Complete Novelette, "The Train Expecter," by Laurance M. Hare, author of the Scrub Smith tales, makes you so well acquainted with Johnny Webster and his problems that you are keenly eager to find out how he fares with the bold project he attempts to put over.

Just Relax, Please

By ROSE HENDERSON

Showing how close to tragedy one may come by deferring the making of a social call

BENDING over the bandaged chin and recumbent form of a fat, fussy woman in Mme. Rejan's beauty parlors, Annette Gaynor lifted one slim heel from her slim patent-leather pump and said "damn" under her breath.

It was four o'clock of a more than busy afternoon. Annette's feet hurt abominably, her eyes ached, her arms ached and a dull pain crept through her shoulders.

Yet no frown marred the delicately plucked brows, no petulant droop curved her red lips, no single sign of discomfort lined her lovely face. She whirled the reclining chair closer to the green lacquered table full of bottles and cold cream jars and dropped her heel back into her pump.

Annette was the dainty, perfect attendant and her fragile blond loveliness contributed notably to the beauty parlor's atmosphere of eternal youth. Mme. Rejan was strong on atmosphere and she preached in a thousand ways the beguiling fairy tale of eternal youth.

"Now, just relax," murmured Annette, in the firm but soothing tones which *madame* required of her assistants.

She patted cold cream into the flabby muscles below her patient's eyes and then applied an ice-pack. She removed the pack and daubed on a delicately scented astringent.

She took off the bandage and massaged the flesh of chin and throat with a clever electrical contrivance. As Annette put the buzzing electrical thing away the fat woman heaved her shoulders higher on the padded reclining chair and began to chatter.

"Now, my dear, if you'll treat my shoulders a bit. The left one pains me at times. The circulation isn't very good, I'm afraid. My daughter says—"

"Hell!" said Annette under her breath, "I can't stand her talking to-

day!" She laid a firm, slim hand on the woman's forehead. "Now just relax, please," she ordered, with calm young authority.

The woman's chatter ceased. Annette buzzed another electrical appliance over the wide cushiony shoulder and her eyes wandered beyond the white-curtained booth to the mandolin clock above the reception room mantel.

Four fifteen. In ten minutes she'd have this appointment finished. If the other woman didn't come promptly at half past Annette could let her go.

But then, what difference did it make, Annette questioned in gloomy afterthought. She didn't have anything to do but ride uptown in the subway, grab a bite to eat in some noisy cafeteria and then go to her room and go to bed.

"Anyway, the bed'll feel good," Annette told herself wearily.

In another white-curtained booth Miss Benjamin patted, massaged, buzzed an electric roller. *Madame* was out shopping that afternoon. Annette and Benjie were alone and they had been rushed to death.

After the last customer had disappeared they would have to wipe off bottles and jars and glass shelves. They would have to change the water in the flower vases, dust mirrors and chairs and polished table-tops, leaving the place in immaculate order, with its exquisite green and rose luxury, its atmosphere of perpetual youth and springtime.

Once Annette had enjoyed fussing over the elegant furnishings. To-day she loathed them. She loathed herself and Benjie and handsome Mme. Rejan who was fifty-five or so and looked thirty-five.

She loathed the expensive, glass-stoppered bottles, the padded chairs, the piles of clean towels, the pink roses and yellow jonquils in the expensive vases. Most of all she loathed Dr. Jerry B. Thomas, the carefully groomed young man on the floor below who had been taking her to dances and theaters and out to dine and then, all of a sudden, had dropped her cold.

All of this loathing she hid, of course, under her tranquil professional manner. A beauty shop is no place for nerves, and Annette was a good stoic.

Like the Spartan youth who had his vitals gnawed by the fox, she took her punishment without whining. She even smiled, discreetly, so as not to make lines.

But she sometimes felt that she would explode. She visioned herself going suddenly violent and smashing the everlasting bottles in some astonished customer's face.

She was sick of the eternal posing and lying and flattery that kept up the illusion of youthful beauty, sick of patting the wrinkles out of aging faces and trying to pretend that there was no such thing as Father Time. And all she could do was to curse silently.

Annette's deft fingers worked automatically while her mind roved among her woes. She finished the fat woman, escorted her to the elevator, returned and removed all soiled towels and daubs of absorbent cotton in the white-curtained booth.

She straightened the bottles and jars on the green table and received the next "appointment." A nervous, haggard woman who jumped every time anything touched her.

II.

As Annette was unusually late that evening she got into the worst possible jam in the subway. Mobs swept about her and fairly knocked her off her feet and into the Broadway express. . .

They pulled and mauled and pushed. They gouged her ribs with their elbows and bumped against her knees as she hung precariously to a strap that three other people were hanging to.

The air was so close that it made her want to hold her breath. Her feet

were hurting again, tortured by the slim, high-heeled pumps. Some groping hand had knocked her hat awry.

As the train thundered out of the Times Square station Annette straightened her hat and managed a glimpse at the small mirror in the top of her bag. She saw a petite young face with wise gray eyes and smooth blond hair in soft wings in front of her ears. Her lips were a scarlet Cupid's bow, her throat slender and white above her soft fur collar.

She pulled her hat a shade further over her nose and forced the faint look of fatigue from her eyes. Her thoughts went back to Jerry, to those heavenly nights when he had driven her home in his cozy runabout, to the plays they had seen together, to the rapture of dancing, held close in Jerry's arms.

He had liked her then, she was sure of it. Why had he changed all at once? Why, why, why?

Perhaps he decided that a beauty parlor assistant wasn't quite the sort of wife for a rising young physician. Thought she was a bit common and cheap and brainless.

She could have sworn that he was on the point of asking her to marry him. Then his resolution didn't jell some way. Something made him change his mind.

In spite of her stoicism Annette could not restrain a tear from trickling down the side of her small straight nose.

She couldn't get to her handkerchief and had to dash the tear away with the back of her glove.

A fat, round-eyed man over in the corner was ogling her. Annette let go of the strap and turned her back in frigid disgust.

"Lord, I'm getting absolutely goofy!" she told herself scornfully.

But she couldn't seem to drag her mind away from its painful contemplation of Jerry.

She remembered the first time she ever saw him. That day *madame* took a fainting spell and Benjie sent Annette down to call old Dr. Wharton.

Jerry was in the office and took charge of the waiting patients while Dr. Wharton came up to attend Mme. Rejan. *Madame* and the senior doctor were old friends.

She remembered the first evening Jerry called to take her home. She remembered his brown eyes, his quick smile and the way his hair waved back if he let it get long enough.

She had thought that she knew what it meant to be lonely before she met Jerry—and lost him, but she hadn't really. Never in her life before had she known such a positively frightening sense of desolation.

"I've got to have something to think about," she decided. "I've got to study something and get a different job. Something that'll take every ounce of brains I've got. Something so hard that I can't think about anything else. You have too much time to think at *madame's* and nothing special to think about."

If she could only afford a small apartment, like Benjie had, Annette yearned. A place where she could cook her own meals and have her own furniture.

But she didn't have a cent ahead now. She'd been spending everything on clothes so that she would look right to go out with Jerry. And there was the blue and silver dance frock that she hadn't even worn. She probably never would wear it now, she thought.

A decent girl couldn't go to dances alone, and she'd never meet any more nice men, living the way she did. Working over women's faces and hair all day and then dashing home in the subway, going to bed, and getting up to rush to the shop again in the morning.

She didn't want to meet anybody but Jerry, anyhow. But if she could, it might help her to forget him.

If she had an apartment like Benjie's, it wouldn't seem so desolate. Ben-

jie's mother had died recently and now the daughter was alone.

Benjie wasn't so young any more. She must be around forty, though she managed to look about thirty. She had been at Annette to come out to the apartment lately, but Annette hadn't gone.

She'd been busy going out with Jerry, and then she had a notion that it was just as well not to see too much of the people you worked with every day. You got enough of them at the shop. Why prolong the agony?

Benjie acted kind of queer lately, too, and got on Annette's nerves more than usual. She was forever moving things and then forgetting what she did with them. Only that afternoon Annette had jumped on her about that.

"Benjie, if you lose that shampoo again, I'll get you fired!" she had threatened.

She didn't mean anything of course. But it was a nasty thing to say. And suddenly Annette remembered the look in Benjie's eyes when she brought the shampoo.

It was a hurt, frightened look. Annette began to feel remorseful, to realize that she had spoken sharply more than once to the quiet, older woman who worked in the next booth.

Benjie was looking tired, too. *Madame* had spoken about it. And you—you couldn't look tired in a beauty shop. It wasn't good for the trade.

A faint natural blush crept into Annette's cheeks under the careful make-up she always wore.

Now, what if Benjie took that seriously about getting her fired? What if the woman was worrying over looking older and losing her beauty and maybe her job?

Benjie had a nice face. Thin and distinguished looking. She had a nice voice, too, and she was a very patient person.

In imagination Annette could hear Benjie's voice. "Now, just relax, please. Oh, yes, *madame's* chin line is much improved. Very youthful, in fact. No, *madame,* I don't think the lines show at all worth mentioning. Even young girls have these faint lines around the eyes now. Sports, you know, and motoring so much. They give character really."

The sort of thing everybody said at Mme. Rejan's. Benjie said it with unusual patience and convincingness in the stuffy booth next to Annette's.

Day after day, day after day! And she'd been worried over her mother's illness, and never showed it. And now she was alone.

"I've been darned snippy to Benjie," Annette confessed to herself as the subway train roared into One Hundred and Sixteenth Street. "I'm going to see her to-night and—apologize. We can have dinner together," she thought. "I'll find out what she has, and buy some stuff if she'll let me."

She felt mean to have refused Benjie's repeated invitations.

"Gosh, she must be lonesome! And I never even went to her mother's funeral!" said Annette, with belated self-accusation.

III.

Annette hurried up the subway stairs, treading on the heels of a peevish woman and apologizing absently. Benjie's apartment was over toward Lenox Avenue.

It would be quite a walk, but Annette didn't have the price of a taxi. Only about a dollar in change, and she wanted to buy something for Benjie. To-morrow was Saturday and pay day.

"I'll get some nice grapes and apples," she decided. "You can always use fruit, and I won't wait to see what she has."

She raced across One Hundred and Sixteenth Street and ran down the steps into Morningside Park. Midway down the long stairs she slowed up, half consciously, one of *madame's*

beauty rules drumming through her thoughts. "Always avoid the sense of hurry. It gives the face a strained, aging look."

Annette shrugged and ran on with reckless speed. She was beginning to be actually worried about Benjie, and the beauty rule seemed a foolish, heartless thing to pop into her head just then.

"But of course *madame's* stuff does a lot of good," she reflected. "Women get hold of themselves and learn not to fret and nag their families. It helps the wives to hang on to their husbands all right, too. So it's not so bad. It's —it's just a good deal like doctors' work," she added defensively, thinking of Jerry and his probable sense of superiority.

The telephone boy rang Miss Benjamin's apartment violently, but got no answer.

"Don't guess she's in," he decided.

"Well, take me up anyway, please," said Annette. "I'd like to leave this fruit for her. I can put it with a note outside her door."

So the elevator whisked her up to the top floor. She tried the hall door and found the lock off.

"Don't wait. I'll go on in," she told the boy. "She must have just stepped out for a minute.

"Hello, Benjie!" she called as she went into the narrow, dark hallway.

A light burned in the dining room. As she put her bag of fruit on the table Annette noticed the disorder of the room.

Dirty dishes, cluttered chairs, a mess of papers. Not at all like the neat and painstaking Miss Benjamin.

"Hello, Benjie!" she called again.

As she glanced at the scattered papers and letters on the table, she caught sight of a note with her own name on it, grabbed up the envelope and tore it open with shaking fingers.

It was a good-by note. Something about there being nothing to look forward to. "Lonely—tired—nothing to live for—" The writing straggled off almost illegibly.

"Benjie!" screamed Annette, and ran into the tiny bedroom.

The woman lay white and still on the rumpled bed.

Annette touched her forehead and found it warm. She clutched the slim wrists and felt a faint pulse.

"Benjie, how could you?" she cried.

She dashed into the bathroom for a wet towel, changed her mind and ran to the telephone instead. Dr. Wharton would probably be gone, but she'd try his office.

She tore through the telephone book for the number. While the boy was calling that she noted the doctor's residence phone, scribbling it on a pad that lay there.

"Yes, the doctor is in, but he's just leaving," the office girl told her.

"Don't let him leave," ordered Annette. "Tell him to come to Miss Benjamin's apartment right away as soon as he can get here. It's very serious—a matter of life and death! You tell him that, and I'll give you the number in a minute."

She couldn't recall the house number just then, and she called the boy for it. But he was gone now, running the elevator.

She ran to the dining room, found an old envelope addressed to Miss Edna Benjamin, and gave the number to the doctor's office girl.

"She's taken something—veronal, possibly," she added. "She's unconscious."

"He'll be right up," the girl told her.

Annette ran back to the bedroom. It would take the doctor some time, she reflected. Uptown traffic was heavy at this hour. She ought to have called a man who was nearer, she told herself, trying frantically to think what she should do first.

But she'd have to get that boy again. She didn't know any doctors near.

She dashed back to the telephone,

but nobody answered. She ran out in the hall and rang the elevator bell. When the boy came up she told him to get a doctor as quick as he could.

Then she went back and put wet cloths on Miss Benjamin's head, rubbed her hands, tried to get her to sit up. But the woman just lay there, limp and lifeless.

When Annette slapped her hands she moaned a little, and at that Annette began to weep hysterically. She had no idea what to do.

She thought of calling a neighbor in, but dreaded to. People got so excited at such times. They might do the wrong thing.

"Benjie, how could you? But it's my fault—my fault!" she cried over and over as she rubbed the limp wrists.

She kept wetting the still white face, trying to force some water between the pale lips, and rubbing the lifeless hands and arms.

"Listen, Benjie, I didn't mean—anything," sobbed Annette. "You—you got to get well—can't you hear me, Benjie?"

IV.

THEN somebody knocked at the door and walked in without waiting. Annette jumped to her feet and saw that it was Jerry.

"Dr. Wharton telephoned me," he explained. "I was uptown and could get here sooner than he could."

He jerked off his coat, opened his bag and began working over the prostrate woman. Annette ran to the bathroom and kitchen for various things he wanted. She hardly knew what she was doing.

After a few minutes Miss Benjamin opened her eyes. "Oh, Annette, Annette—how good—or you—to come!" she gasped.

Annette began sobbing again. She knelt beside the bed and clutched one of the thin hands to her lips.

"You—must get well, Benjie!" she cried. "We—we can't get on without you. I—I'll come and see you—often, so you—won't get lonely!"

"She'll be all right. Don't be a goose! Stomach pump fixed her," mumbled Jerry. "Go and get me some warm water."

The doctor that the elevator boy had called came in just then. A few minutes later Dr. Wharton arrived, and they all decided that Miss Benjamin should go to the hospital.

"Better for her there," said old Dr. Wharton. "All she needs is a good rest."

So Annette hunted up a few clothes and things to take along and Jerry called an ambulance.

"I'm going with her," Annette announced, when the white-coated internes arrived with a stretcher.

"She'll be all right now. You better not go. They wouldn't let you stay at the hospital," Dr. Wharton told her.

"Anyway, I'm going," insisted Annette. And Miss Benjamin clung to her hand and wept, gratefuly now to have escaped the dark nightmare.

Jerry didn't say anything. Just stood around staring at Annette as if she were a stranger.

She did look different. Her usually smooth bob stood up wildly all over her head. Her face was dirty and tear-stained and her make-up quite gone.

She had slopped water over the front of her blouse and down on to her pumps and stockings. One arm had a red welt burned across it where she had reached over a steaming kettle.

The internes put Miss Benjamin on the stretcher, took the bag that Annette had packed and started downstairs. Annette jammed on her hat, grabbed her coat and trailed close at their heels.

"I'll be right with you, Benjie," she called, skipping after them like a brisk and blindly devoted puppy.

Both of the internes growled at her reprovingly, and one of them said that there would be no room.

"I can sit right beside her. She's

little," insisted Annette. "I want to talk to her so she won't be lonesome and I want to be sure that she has a nice room."

So they finally let her go. It was a strange, dashing ride through the noisy streets. Lights flashed in their faces.

The ambulance bell jangled and the traffic seemed to divide like magic to make a way for them. Policemen waved them past stop signals. People turned to stare after them curiously.

One interne drove and the other sat back at the end door, sedate and silent. Miss Benjamin clutched Annette's hand like a frightened child.

And Annette, leaning over, saw the drawn look gradually softening in the thin white face, the fear fading from the tense dark eyes.

"You'll be all right in a day or two, Benjie," Annette assured her. "And then you've got to take a good long vacation. I'll make *madame* give you one. I'll tell her I won't stay unless she does. You can go to the country. I know a darling little farm up in Connecticut. And I'll come up and see you week-ends.

"Money? Don't you worry about money. I make quite a little weekly dough, as you realize. Tips and all. I'll help you out and so will *madame*. We'll be glad to. The farm's cheap, anyway. I'll bring you some magazines and novels to-morrow. You—you just want to relax, Benjie, and take things easy. You've been working too darned hard."

The ambulance lurched up to the hospital gate and Annette walked beside her friend as the internes carried the stretcher up the front steps, up a shadowy stairway inside and down long corridors into a clean, bare room that smelled faintly of medicines.

"Oh, look, Benjie!" cried Annette. "You've got a tree right by your window. Isn't that gorgeous? Nice little room, too. I'm sure you'll like it here."

She bent and touched the wan forehead with her lips.

"See you later," she grinned and went out, down the narrow corridors.

Tears sprang into her eyes but she winked them back resolutely. She felt terribly tired and shaky all at once. She must get home and get something to eat.

Her head felt absolutely woozy. And she had forgotten how they turned in the corridors and now she came up against a wall instead of a doorway.

She whirled about and bumped violently into a man who seemed to be coming after her.

"Oh, I—beg your pardon!" stammered Annette. "I was—trying to find the way—out. Could you please—show me?"

"Sure, I'll show you." Annette jumped like a scared cat. It was Jerry's voice, and he seized her by the arm and marched her along in a very stern, professional manner.

"Well, how did—you happen to come?" she asked.

"I came after you," he told her. "You're all nervous and upset. You'll be right where that woman was if you don't look out."

Annette dabbed at her eyes with a stringy handkerchief.

"Well, naturally, I—I was a bit upset—over Benjie. Anybody would be," she admitted stiffly. "But you—*you* don't need to worry!"

Her voice registered scorn. And she looked up at him resentfully, but met the eager, hungry look that she'd seen in his eyes when he had almost asked her to marry him.

Annette looked down, quickly, straightened her hat and pulled at her damp, wrinkled blouse.

"I—I'm horribly messy," she observed apologetically.

The grip on her arm tightened. "Yes, and thank God for it!" blurted Jerry. "I've found out at last that you're—*human!*"

"Human?"

"Sure! I thought you were damned hard-boiled."

"H-hard-boiled!"

"Yes. You—you had me thinking you were nothing but a blamed bisque doll. You had me scared that you could never think of anything—serious. Anything much but your—good looks. You are easy to look at. Don't I know it though! But I—wanted something else. Now I know better. I—I know you can *feel!* I—"

They came to the shadowy stairway and Jerry grabbed her up in his arms.

"O-o-oh!" gasped Annette. Then she relaxed peacefully on his shoulder.

THE END

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WHERE CLOTHES MAKE THE MAN

The New York *Evening Post*, commenting on the recent ruling of the Actors' Equity, which restricts English actors from acting in American plays, holds that a complete substitution of American actors for the one hundred English actors in current productions would result in no change in quality. English actors are fashionable, the *Post* maintains, because they look as if they belonged in the drawing-rooms in which the action of most plays occurs and because they wear their clothes well.

We believe strongly in any ruling which favors American over foreigners in a profession; at the same time we feel there is reason for the popularity of actors who create the more perfect illusion of reality. The *Post* objects to the English accent in American rôles, and so do we; but it doesn't seem possible for Americans to wear their clothes as well as Englishmen because there isn't the tradition attached to dress in America, which can remember buckskin pioneer costumes.

At the time our forbears were sneaking through woods wearing a coon skin cap, English lads at the large schools were cocking their top hats as they strolled nonchalantly along past a king's castle. For generations the boys at Eton College have worn their top hats, gray trousers, dark coats, which have become famous as Eton jackets, and linen-spread collars, long known as Eton collars.

Called a college, Eton is similar in scholastic standing to our exclusive prep schools, such as Groton and Andover, and boys enter at the age of twelve. It is situated in the ancient town of Buckingham across the Thames from Windsor, the summer home of the ruling line of Great Britain; it was founded in 1440 by King Henry VI.

Oddly enough, to an American, Eton is known as a public school, meaning exactly the opposite of public school in the United States: it is exceedingly expensive, its student body is largely composed of the sons of the ruling classes, and until quite recently the sons of tradesmen were scorned, if they were able to enter. The other famous public schools of England, Harrow, Winchester, Rugby, also affect formal wear for the boys, using top hats on Sundays; and at Harrow, the avowed rival of Eton, they wear a light blue jacket, known as a "bluer," and the older boys wear tail coats.

So, while the public school graduates who later go on the stage are very few, the tradition of formal clothes in the youths has pervaded the country. In London top hats are common, while top hats on Fifth and Park Avenues on Sundays can be counted on one's fingers, and they are usually worn by those of the older generation. It is not exceptional in any of London's fashionable hotels to see mere lads in tail coats, wing collars, top hats, and spats.

Clothes worn in colleges and prep schools in America largely influence the dress of smart young men. It is informal, and undergoes occasional vogues of downright slovenliness. In England where the influence of the clothes of public school lads is equally strong, or stronger, the youths grow up accustomed to formal clothes, to immaculate dress. And it is their familiarity with formal clothes which produces the ease and nonchalance which distinguishes them.

Let us protect our American actors, let us preserve our native accent; but let us discover some means of creating the ultimate illusion for tired people in a drab world to forget themselves in a world of make believe. At present, in the make believe of social worlds the advantage is with the actors whose tradition in dress extends further back than the national tradition of others. If our American actors would achieve an equally effective illusion of drawing-room presence and distinctiveness of dress, it looks as if they must begin earlier in life.

The Ruler of Zem-Zem

By G. G. PENDARVES

Horrifying experiences in a forbidden city, welcomed as a refuge after being lost in an African desert

"*EFFENDI!* He comes—the sand-devil comes!" Omar, the guide, pointed a lean hand in the direction of a curious twisting pillar of sand discernible in the distance.

The south wind—the dreaded *Gibli*—rose with appalling suddenness as he spoke, and at once the air became a thick sheet of sand, through which the little caravan fought blindly, desperately.

Every loose cover and mat flapped savagely, thereby irritating the camels to madness. They roared and snarled at the shrieking wind which buffeted them.

As he saw the heavy loads begin to sway precariously on the backs of the terrified beasts, Brian Cardell turned to speak to the guide, but it was impossible to identify any one in the storm: a corner of the wind-driven curtain would lift momentarily before Cardell's straining eyes and reveal a group of Arabs staggering blindly to and fro, their hoods down over their heads and handkerchiefs over their mouths; or he would glimpse a camel laboring along in a white, swirling mist—then darkness and sand blotted out everything.

At last he heard faint, muffled shouts, and in the roaring darkness his hand was grasped, and Omar's voice yelled in his ear:

"The camels are barraked, *effendi!* Come, I will guide thee to a place of safety."

Cardell caught a brief glimpse of a wide semicircle of camels, with boxes piled up round them to give protection from the "demon" of the Sahara. Then Ned Montgomery's voice hailed him, and he crawled under the mound of blankets, beneath which his two friends had found shelter.

For hours they crouched there, blinded, gasping, tortured by thirst and the stinging smart of the sand, until at last the howling fury of the wind dropped to fitful gusts of rage, and finally died out completely.

The pock-marked, melancholy face of Omar looked very anxious as the

three Americans scrambled from their refuge and asked for his report.

"If it is written that we shall arrive at our journey's end, doubtless we shall arrive, Imshallah!" he answered them heavily. "Allah is great, but so also are the dunes between us and Bezoora!"

Camp was broken, and after much difficulty the complaining camels were loaded, and the caravan well on its way again, when Durning drew the attention of his two companions to the guide.

"What the devil does the old image think he's doing?" he remarked, staring at Omar, who was plodding along in a very strange way on ahead, looking about him continually, and veering from right to left as he walked.

Cardell, who understood Arabs much better than he did his own countrymen, watched the guide closely for a few minutes, restraining the impetuous Durning from interference.

"If this desert were not drier than any State in America, it would be easy to diagnose his symptoms!" laughed Montgomery.

Cardell looked very serious, and said: "He's losing his head! It's no joke, let me tell you, for that to happen out here," he went on soberly as the others laughed. "To 'lose one's head' is reckoned a real disease among these people of the desert! It may develop into madness, or, on the other hand, it may pass like a cloud from his brain."

"And if it doesn't?" inquired Durning.

"Well, I guess I can make Bezoora anyway, with a compass and the stars!" replied Cardell with a confidence he did not feel.

Montgomery favored him with a broad wink, reading the doubt which lay behind the spoken words. It was never any use trying to bluff Ned Montgomery, for he read people as most people read books.

He was one of the leading actors of the day, a very rare artist, who had burned out his vitality in the glare of New York footlights, and had joined the Saharan expedition in order to recuperate.

Baked by the desert sun, hardened by the desert wind, Ned had changed in the last eight months, from a moody, introspective, hypersensitive man into a real adventurer, and was half worshiped by the Arabs for his gay stoicism.

The wilderness had altered Durning, too. He had lost forty pounds in weight, and the real man was fast emerging from the cloak of gold which had fallen on him from his father's shoulders.

As to Brian Cardell, the last ten years had made him a true son of the desert. Ostensibly an antiquarian, whose passion for excavation kept him year after year in the wilderness, this interest was merely his excuse for living the life which appealed to him.

Long before the next halt was reached that day, the guide had begun to wander round in circles, and, when he was put on a camel, he perched there like a sick monkey and muttered to himself, gazing fixedly at the palms of his own hands as if to read the mystery of the desert there.

Days and nights of increasing discomfort and misery followed, for the compass proved utterly unreliable, and the sky, night after night, was as dark as Eblis. The weary caravan plodded over unending miles of absolutely featureless country, where nothing, save an occasional camel skeleton broke the monotony, and the rests grew longer and longer as men and beasts weakened.

By the sixth day the water allowance had been reduced to a spoonful night and morning; and the food consisted of dates mixed with sand, dark and hard as pebbles.

The camels had become so ravenous that it was difficult to prevent them

from tearing the baggage with their strong yellow teeth, to get at the straw within. Most of the poor beasts had sores because their loads were badly packed by the tired, despairing men.

One had an unhealed bite on its shoulder as the result of an argument with a hasty-tempered *naga*—female camel. Another bore a nasty cut on its foot, while a third was with foal.

The intolerable heat by day alternated with bitter winds by night, and many of the men had rheumatism as well as bleeding feet, sores, fever, headaches from the constant glare, and an ever-torturing thirst.

The seventh night came—a clear night at last—and the caravan dragged on until the great red moon rose over the desert, and then one of the camels lay down and refused to get up again. It died within an hour of its collapse, and, spent by their efforts to restore it, the leaders decided to make camp for the night.

There was no brushwood and consequently no fires, but as there was nothing to put in the cooking pots it did not matter very much, except that fires would have served to keep at bay the appalling loneliness that closed in around the three white men as they sat huddled in their blankets, while men and beasts snored and grunted around them.

"We can only do one more day—if that." Durning's voice was flat and expressionless. "The only suggestion the Arabs make is to trust in Allah!"

"They are justified by results more often than not," replied Montgomery.

"Our guide has failed us," Cardell put in. "Our maps and compass have proved utterly unreliable, as we were warned they would. Now there's only the element of chance to reckon on! We'll toss up for our direction when morning comes."

They poked their heads out of their sleeping bags in the shivering gray dawn, to see Omar waving his unbound turban frantically—the dull languor gone from his face, his dark eyes keen and flashing as he pointed.

"Land—land! By the mercy of Allah, it is land!"*

They scrambled out and looked. There was a solid black ridge on the horizon, and as they stared with bloodshot, smarting eyes, the three travelers realized how great their despair of yesterday had been.

Handfuls of dates were distributed and double rations of the brackish water before the caravan set out with hopes which ignored all pain and weakness. Seven—eight—nine hours they toiled on. The flat, monotonous sand gave place first to black, uneven rocks with green patches where the camels fought greedily, and later to rolling dunes.

As they approached it, the black ridge on the horizon was hidden from view by intervening dunes; but, late in the afternoon, from the crest of a colossal wave of sand, Omar was the first to get a real glimpse of their objective.

He came running back with a frightened face, and said a word at which the waiting Arabs raised their voices in a positive howl of terror, and began to beat their breasts and call on Allah.

"Zem-Zem!" repeated Cardell. "What is Zem-Zem? Why are they all having hysterics like this?"

"May Allah guard us! *Malcish,* this is an evil hour in which mine eyes gaze on that very evil city! Zem-Zem is a place forsaken by Allah, and altogether given over to devils!" wailed Omar, and the camel men and boys wailed with him.

Montgomery, whose sense of the ridiculous nothing could quench, struck an attitude before them, and began beating time with an imaginary baton.

"Miserere in A minor! All together

*Arab expression for a landmark, when traveling over unknown country.

now—crescendo on the second Zem, my boys!"

"Don't be a fool, Jim!" Cardell urged him hastily. "Do you want to spend another night without food or drink?"

"Not with a perfectly good Zem-Zem right in front of me."

"You'll have a perfectly good knife blade between your shoulders in a minute, my son," Cardell admonished him grimly.

Then, turning to the gibbering natives he asked: "What is it you fear?"

"*Effendi,* this city is indeed very evil!" quavered Omar, his dark face gray with fear. "It is ruled by jinn and shaitans, and the people who dwell within its walls are mightier than any others in the land. Always there have been kings and warriors who sought to take Zem-Zem—for there are great riches there—but none have succeeded! Truly it is the abode of devils!"

"It is true—by Allah, it is true!" chorused the Arabs.

"It is also true, my friends," responded Cardell, "that unless you stop behaving like she-camels, I will shoot you here and now, before the Zem-Zem devils have a look-in!"

He drew his revolver and Durning and Montgomery ostentatiously followed suit. The natives drew back, muttering among themselves, while Cardell beckoned the old guide to him.

"We start for Zem-Zem in an hour's time," he said. "I will kill the first man to disobey orders. You know that I am a man of my word."

"*Wallahi!* I know it!" groaned Omar with memories of past encounters. "Alas, that I should lead my own tribe to death."

"You've been doing that pretty steadily this trip," commented the other brutally. "Personally, I prefer a knife or a bullet at Zem-Zem to the jackals and vultures out here in the desert. It's only a choice of evils at the best."

"What is written, is written! On your own head be it, *effendi!*" was Omar's mournful acquiescence as he limped back to the trembling retinue.

II.

THE next few miles were a purgatory of effort. In a torpor of pain and weariness, men and camels dragged themselves over the curling ridges, the latter stumbling and moaning, and making occasional short rushes toward dark patches in the sand, hoping to find grass among the heaps of stone.

Gherd after sandy gherd they left behind as the red splendor of the sunset faded to mauve and lemon, and finally merged into the cold gray of the sand itself. The dunes changed abruptly to mounds and hillocks covered with decayed scrub, and the camels almost trampled the men on foot into the sand as they dashed past them suddenly toward a big patch of feathery green bushes.

But they did not eat, and when the Arabs noticed the crumbling ruins of a well close by, they shrugged their aching shoulders and scornfully kicked the loose sand underfoot.

"Salt!" reported Omar. "It is the well of Tiz, where many travelers have died, *effendi!*" He waved a dirty, emaciated hand toward a couple of skeletons near them, and indicated dismal little heaps farther off, which no one cared to investigate.

"Already I see the fires of *Eblis*—hell—within the walls of the city," murmured one cowering native.

The squat outline of Zem-Zem was fast merging into the desert darkness, but now they saw faint gleams of yellow in the night, where the watch fires on the city walls began to challenge the evening star.

The natives huddled together with terrified whispers, while the camels stood swaying their long necks wearily, and Cardell suddenly determined to bring things to a crisis.

Paying no attention to the curses and wailings that rose around him, he set

fire to a dry brown bush at his side, frantically heaping on sticks and branches, which lay scattered over the ground, until the leaping flame rivaled the watch fires of Zem-Zem.

"Give the order to barrak!" he said to the trembling guide, who looked helplessly from Cardell to the grim outline of the city, holding his outspread fingers before his face to avert the evil that confronted him. Then he gave a low, quavering call:

"*Adaryayan! Adaryayan!*" — We have arrived, oh, sick ones!"

At the familiar cry, the camels sank, grunting, to their knees, and lay down with their heads flat on the sand in the extremity of exhaustion..

"*Bismillah!* It is a madness, this fire! We should have sent a spy into the city!"

"Truly Allah hath sent darkness into the mind of the *effendi!* Omar should have gone first to prepare our way—to soften the heart of the Shekh by cunning tales!"

"*Wallahi! Wallahi!* Now will they come with might to destroy us—oh, very evil hour!"

One after another the men wailed and lamented as the red fire leaped skyward.

"Good old Guy Fawkes!" muttered Montgomery between black, parched lips. "Bonfires for all and long live America!" and he crumpled in a heap by the crackling flames and was instantly asleep.

"I'll watch," said Cardell huskily. "You may as well sleep until they come."

"Thanks," replied Durning. "I prefer to see them coming!" and squatting down by the fire, he drew out a last cherished packet of cigarettes and eyed it thoughtfully.

"Might as well," said his companion. "The Zem-Zem devils may not give us another chance!"

They puffed away, pretending great content, but did not deceive each other. Durning's smoke went out three times, and his hand was shaking as he laboriously lit up again. And Cardell bit his cigarette in two as he watched the distant walls and tried to pierce the blue-black curtain of the night.

The moon rose slowly as they sat feeding the fire, and waiting for some sign of recognition from Zem-Zem; and soon the Arabs lay rolled in their blankets like gigantic chrysalis—their troubles drowned in sleep.

One—two hours crawled to a close, and the wind began to blow piercingly cold, making a strange, whistling sound over the stones which strewed the ground. Durning got to his feet reluctantly to collect brushwood.

Cardell turned at an exclamation from him to see a Touareg Arab at his elbow, and as the two Americans stared incredulously, one veiled form after another rose from the ground and silently approached, until the glitter of their eyes was visible between hood and *littram*—veil over nose and mouth.

"*Aselamu, Aleikum!*" the voice of the first Touareg greeted them.

"Greeting to you also, in Allah's name!" responded Cardell. "We ask food and shelter."

The man made a comprehensive gesture toward the vast walls of Zem-Zem, and spoke a few words to his following. The Arabs obeyed swiftly, rousing the bewildered and panic-stricken servants, and helping them to get the camels to their feet. Then, in unbroken silence our little retinue was shepherded toward the distant city.

The three white men were aware of something very sweet and potent being put to their lips, which ran like fire through their veins as they drank thirstily—then the desert faded out—and they sank beneath wave after wave of deepest oblivion.

III.

THE following days were clouded by fever and pain, but the travelers had

no reason to complain of their treatment, for the three days' hospitality, which is the law of the desert, was liberally interpreted. But they were prisoners in the great arched court in which they woke, every exit was guarded, and every question which Cardell put to the gigantic guardians was left unanswered.

When the third night fell, all three realized that the time had come for some crisis to occur, and the dinner served to them was left almost untouched.

"About time for the play to start?" asked Montgomery, putting down his mint-flavored tea, and leaning back against a tightly stuffed red satin cushion. "The overture finished with that dinner, I imagine!"

"Wish I knew what they've done with our servants," was Cardell's comment.

"It's all so absurdly like a scene from the 'Arabian Nights'!" continued Montgomery. "Eastern palace —black mutes — mysterious agency which provides every creature comfort. I suppose if we rubbed the right lamp the jinni would appear!"

"If I'm not mistaken, the jinni is on his way now," Cardell interrupted.

They sat alert and listening, and a murmur of voices reached them—the *pad-pad* of unshod feet, then the cloth-of-gold, which curtained an arch in front of them, was drawn back in one swift movement.

They rose involuntarily, astonishment giving way to a most unpleasant sensation of horror.

Cardell reacted with the same peculiar aversion he had for reptiles—the same chill sickness seized him, the same rigidity of the nerve centers at the base of his skull.

Then he heard the hiss of Montgomery's indrawn breath, and the sound steadied him. He glanced sidewise at Durning and noticed a muscle working violently at the angle of the jaw, his tanned face a dirty yellow.

A horrible rustle of laughter greeted them as they bowed, and began, in halting words, to return thanks for hospitality received; but, at sight of the obscene mirth which possessed their host, speech failed them altogether.

The dim, almost sightless eyes of that living death which confronted them, gleamed maliciously in their red sockets — the pendulous, discolored lips quivered—and the glistening, silvery skin of the face, one side almost rotted away, was a thousand times more revolting as it stretched and wrinkled in that awful laughter.

This was Abou Koi, ruler of Zem-Zem — whose strength had made his city greater than any other city in the desert! Abou Koi, the warrior, who had reddened his spear point in the blood of countless victims both in war and in peace — for he loved to kill! Abou Koi, whose devouring lust would hold a woman for a day—or a week, and then poison her that none other might drink from that same fair chalice.

Abou, the ruler—the warrior—the lover—and now Abou Koi, the leper, rotting within the walls of his citadel!

"An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth!" said the dreadful whistling voice. "I have given you life, and from you I ask one thing—and that I will have, or I take back my gift again."

Cardell averted his eyes as another spasm of amusement convulsed that awful mask of a face, and asked what gift he craved.

"The jewel which this rich fool bought from Ben Ali at Constantine, and which he hath placed in his bank in Algiers," and Abou Koi leered into Durning's stupefied face.

"My brain is not powerless because its sheath is useless and rotted!" went on the shekh. "I know of your eight moons in the desert, oh, rich and foolish white men! I know of the ten

years thou hast tarried with my people also," and he turned to Cardell. "This jewel you hold—the Fire of Allah—is one I have long coveted!"

"And it is the price of our freedom?" put in Montgomery, his face grown suddenly old and stern.

"Even so," answered Abou Koi, leaning forward to grin at their discomfiture. "Moreover, *thou* shalt fetch the jewel." And one fingerless stump was thrust forward from the silken purple robe toward Montgomery.

"I have more knowledge of the desert, and can speak with thy people; it would be better to send me for the emerald," said Cardell.

"I have spoken!" was the savage retort. "This one," indicating Montgomery, "possesseth wisdom thou shalt never make thine own. He shall return with the Fire of Allah ere six moons have waned—ere the Moon of Ramadan hath faded must these eyes of mine behold the jewel, or you who remain within my walls shall die! *Khallas!*—finished!"

IV.

Durning and Cardell were removed immediately from the palace, leaving Montgomery behind, and were led by an escort of villainous Beri-Beri natives through the city, which was a honeycomb of crowded dens. Each cell had a narrow slit of a door, with a spy hole drilled through the wall near the doorjamb, so that passers-by could be peered on from within.

Even by day, as the prisoners discovered later, these doors were locked and barred, each man's hand against his neighbor.

On and on they went through a maze of streets and alleys, many of them roofed over and dark as tunnels; and even the unroofed lanes were full of shadows, where an enemy might lurk to cut one's throat. On and on they went while the inhabitants brushed against them at every turn, filthy, animal-like creatures, fit subjects of the leper rule.

They emerged at last on a tiny courtyard, mounted an outside stairway to a roof, and stared blankly at the warren of flat-parapeted house tops around them. In their immediate vicinity was a confusion of jagged parapets impossible to scale, and on the roof tops was scattered all the odd refuse of the primitive homes of Zem-Zem.

Broken pots, weedy dates, rags, old bones, fruit, and vegetables flung out where the hot sun would dry and bake them—it was the nearest approach to hygiene the inhabitants achieved.

A last heavy door was unbarred, and the prisoners reached a gigantic square-cut pit, around which fortified walls towered up into the quivering air.

"Will you look at that!" Durning's voice rose in blank amazement. "Is this the den of the Forty Thieves?"

The great pit was packed with earthen jars, the smallest big enough to conceal a giant, made of white, chalky clay, and with steps molded in their sides.

"What the devil—" Durning began again.

"It's an old granary," said Cardell. "Centuries old, by the look of it. My stars, what a genius of a man planned this city! Why, man, the place could stand a year's siege and come out smiling. There's plenty of water running underground, too; I heard it as we came along."

"D'you suppose they're going to put us in pickle until Montgomery returns?" replied the other, looking uneasily at the colossal pots.

One of their escort waved them toward a deep archway cut in the thickness of the wall, a couple of mats were flung down at their feet, a jar of water set on the floor, and a string of dates hung from a hook over their heads. Then the native withdrew, and the great bolts shot home outside the door of the courtyard.

At dawn next day the prisoners eagerly inspected the great granary with its four solid corner towers and the massive walls round whose base ran a narrow parapet.

"Not a hole through which a lizard could wriggle out!" was Durning's verdict. "Not even a damned centipede could climb up those walls either! Curses on the blighter who built this place, whoever he was!"

"He had a genius for the art of defense," said Cardell.

"Wish he'd been a moron!" was the bitter response as Durning paced restlessly up and down the narrow parapet. "Six months, perhaps, before old Jim can return!"

"No good counting on his return at all. I doubt if he can do that terrific journey twice in six months. It's a bad trail to Algiers."

"Old Abou Koi will score, anyhow; our death would compensate him for the emerald."

"Yes, he's a devil—a devil!" Cardell responded, his eyes on a wheeling flock of great birds which were circling over Zem-Zem and dropping down among the huddle of roofs at some distance from the granary.

Durning followed the other's glance, and after a moment the significance of what he saw dawned on him.

"Some of the leper's little canary birds come for their morning seed! Looks as though they knew their way about this city all right!"

"The birds!" said the native in answer to Cardell's inquiry when the former came at noon to bring water and a mess of rice and fat mutton in wooden bowls. "You will see them better one day, white men. When the great Shekh grows weary of keeping you alive, you will be put in the square and tied fast. Then will come the birds—and they are hungry—always they are hungry!" And the man leered up into their faces.

The prisoners put no more questions, and a week dragged on interminably, one burning day after another, until a sort of apathy began to blunt their feelings to their danger and their misery.

V.

On the seventh day, however, they were taken with much ceremony back to the palace. Here, Abou Koi awaited them, gibbering and grinning on a marvelous throne of black and white ivory; his shapeless feet on a footstool of solid gold, in which a skull was set.

"You shall speak with me of those strange countries from which you come, O dogs of Unbelievers!" wheezed the leper. "There is much I would learn before thy brother returns with the jewel—if he does return!" he added with a twist of his swollen lips. "Of America and of Europe I would learn—therefore speak."

Abou Koi's brain was razor-keen, and it was indescribably revolting to feel the superhuman strength and passion and energy of the man pent up within that rotten mass of flesh. For a long, terrible hour he questioned his prisoners on politics, art, literature, amusements, schools, prisons, religions, and the private life of the various nations—and in the end he dismissed them with jeers and scorn.

"It is as I thought—there is no wisdom or strength or greatness among the Unbelievers; dogs and slaves to be trodden under the feet of the multitude!"

After that first interview the leper sent weekly for his captives, until at last they felt that the birds themselves—the vultures which came daily for their living rations—would be preferable to that awful corruption which awaited them on his ivory throne, mocking them as they stood in their bonds before him, to answer his interminable questions.

The sixth month, the fatal month of Ramadan, dawned at last, and still Montgomery gave no sign, and still the

two prisoners clung desperately to the hope that he would return.

When only seven days of grace remained, Abou Koi summoned them daily to his presence and began to tell them of the many ingenious ways he had invented for prolonging life under torture.

It was four days before the end, when Cardell noticed the look of warning which Abou Koi's councilor gave him. This man, Hazoor, was never absent from the Shekh's side; he was the most influential man, save Abou Koi, in the whole city, and apparently the only man whose life did not hang on a thread.

Abou Koi treated him as an equal, and in the interviews between the two Americans and the Shekh, the councilor showed himself dignified, wise and courteous, and his few questions were invariably searching.

Cardell watched him covertly, and saw him glance meaningly toward the ground, and lift one foot slightly. The former made no sign, but when Abou Koi turned his back with a last jeer and a long, snickering laugh, Cardell darted forward and picked up the eucalyptus leaf which Hazoor had trodden underfoot.

Safely back in the granary, he showed it to Durning, and their hopes rose high as Cardell began to decipher the few crabbed Arabic characters.

"*Hazoor thy friend. Hope in Allah,*" he translated to his companion, then tore the leaf and dropped it into a huge jar.

VI.

"Do you think he's back?" whispered Durning, looking round fearfully, as though the great pots themselves were eavesdroppers and enemies.

"Do *you?*" asked Durning, after a long pause, in which his companion sat staring across the grilling courtyard.

"No," was the slowly spoken reply. "Why should Hazoor conceal the fact if he wishes to help us?"

"But why should he help us?" objected Durning. "That beastly leper is his little tin god."

"I don't understand it any more than you do," admitted Cardell. "I always liked the man, but—"

"Exactly—but! Well, we've got to die, anyhow, and perhaps this Hazoor can suggest a short cut."

The hours crawled on. Another day— another night!

Almost delirious from fever and suspense, the two sat shaking and overwrought in that damnable pit as the week drew slowly to an end.

On the sixth day, Abou Koi surpassed himself when they were brought before him.

"Listen well, white men," he began. "I have a new thought. It is the finest of all the thoughts that I have had concerning thy end. Because thou art the first white men to die in Zem-Zem, therefore I will give thee a fitting death, nor shalt thou be forgotten too soon when thy souls have been dragged down to Eblis. I will treat thee with great honor, even as I treated the great Shekh—Mahmud ibn Amunullah—who ruled the tribes beyond the Red Wilderness. He was the greatest of all the rulers of the desert—save Abou Koi the Mighty!"

He watched their pale set faces intently, his dim eyes winking evilly between their red lids.

He stood deep in the desert sand, that proud one! Deep—deep down, so that to his very neck the sand closed hot and heavy upon him—and only his head remained unburied! His eyes gazed out over the desert toward his kingdom—over the wide spaces where he had led his warriors against me! His eyes—ah, his eyes!"

The leper rocked and swayed as memories rose within him.

"A trail of honey—an army of ants —and those eyes—that insolent, proud face that defied me! Ah, ah—here it lies now!" And he indicated the skull under his shapeless feet.

Durning swayed in his bonds, and Cardell felt a familiar rigidity grip the back of his neck like an iron hand.

"I have a desire for two more skulls to set in this footstool of mine! Three is a number of good omen. May the thought of my splendid footstool console your last hours!"

Shaken by mirth, the Shekh rose from his throne.

Feverishly the two watched Hazoor for a sign, but the councilor refused to glance in their direction and stalked majestically after his master from the throne room.

The two Americans looked at one another in blank despair. This was the end, then! To-morrow they would be sacrificed for the amusement of Abou Koi, the leper.

"I suppose he couldn't fix it!" hazarded Cardell, as they collapsed limply among their pots once more.

"Guess not," responded Durning dully. "This is where we step off for good!"

VII.

At dawn next day the birds circled ominously over Zem-Zem, wheeling against a dazzling sky, swooping down heavily on the city—their ugly bare necks thrust forward greedily, their great wings moving like flails.

Durning gave a hoarse laugh as he and Cardell watched them for the last time.

"We'll provide their morning cereal to-morrow, perhaps!" he croaked; then he gripped the other's hand, and added in a hurried mumble: "There's no man living I'd rather have with me now than you, old chum. You've been a—a—a—"

Cardell returned his grip with a hearty admonition not to make a fool of himself, and they sat waiting for the heavy plank door to open for the last time.

"Reminds me of my blue funk before the final between the Wanderers and the home team. Wish I had that hefty bat of mine now. I'd die smiling if I could have one good swipe at Abou Koi before I kick off from his filthy city! Just—one—good—swipe!" repeated Durning rapturously.

The sound of bolts withdrawn brought them both to their feet, and as the guard entered they greeted the natives with their usual cheerful insolence.

The headman squinted at them angrily.

"Soon shall I smile also, when I see thee in thy chains. When I hear thee cry and shriek like women! When the—"

With one accord the two Americans launched themselves upon the rascal. It did not matter now what they did, and it was a tremendous relief to fight some one—any one—again!

The native went down like a stone, striking his head on the sharp coping of the pavement.

"The jars!" yelled Durning.

With a laugh, Cardell helped to heave up the prostrate man, and they dragged him over the lip of the nearest pot and tilted him head first inside.

There was a howl from the guard; the cowardly natives had turned to run in the first moment of surprise, but the remembrance of Abou Koi's method of punishment spurred them to action.

Starving and fever-ridden as they were, the prisoners had no chance against the five who fell upon them, and in a few minutes they were being prodded and driven through the dark lanes of the city, their hands securely bound behind their backs.

"Evidently he has stuck to the skull idea!" murmured Durning, as they were pushed past the palace and shepherded toward the city gates.

Abou Koi awaited them there, seated in a palanquin, and surrounded by his warriors mounted on camels; he huddled, mouthing and grimacing, amid his cushions, and as the two white men approached he made an impatient sign to Hazoor.

The latter rode the high-mettled black Arab horse on which he always accompanied his master outdoors, sitting the magnificent beast with royal dignity as the prisoners were halted before him.

"Abou Koi, ruler of Zem-Zem, greets thee through my unworthy lips," said Hazoor gravely, bending a calm, impassive look on the captives. "He bids me draw thy attention to the honor which is done thee, for thy end shall be worthy of thy country and thy rank, O white men!"

A fierce, derisive shout went up from the nearest warriors, echoed by those behind until jeers and laughter filled the hot, quivering air.

Abou Koi imperiously signaled once more, and the gorgeous procession moved forward, each man tossing his spear high in the air and catching it as it fell; all laughing, swaying, shouting in a frenzy of excitement.

Durning and Cardell tramped in the dust of this cavalcade between the camels and Abou Koi, whose palanquin was borne by stalwart negroes.

They went in silence, blinded by the desert glare and choked by the dust. Past endless upthrust spines of black rock, and over wind-tossed ridges, they toiled, their loosened muscles betraying them at every step—on, on over the burning sands, until they reached a vast natural amphitheater encircled by crested dunes.

The warriors made a great ring about the place, while Abou Koi, with two of the negroes and the prisoners, occupied the stage itself.

The slaves were armed with huge shovels, and they began to dig two pits in the center of the amphitheater.

The bandaged stumps of Abou Koi's hands beat an impatient tattoo on his brocaded knee, and Hazoor dismounted and bent his stately head to catch the husky whisper of the voice, which disease often rendered inaudible save to his own keen and faithful ears.

"Dig deep—dig deep, O slaves!" Hazoor interpreted his master's faint hissing whisper in the ringing voice of authority. "These be tall dogs of unbelievers. Dig deep!"

It was much too horrible and fantastic to seem anything but a nightmare to the Americans, as they waited, reeling with faintness on the burning sands.

But when they were seized, pushed down into the holes feet first, and the heavy sand was shoveled in upon them, the real agony of death touched them with icy fingers.

In a short time the sand was about their shoulders, and the slaves were trampling it hard and firm about their necks.

Cardell kept his eyes on the big black feet that moved before him, with their flexible toes and the silver anklets jingling about the legs. He counted the toes on one foot and then on the other, until the whole world seemed reduced to a colossal pair of black feet, trampling—trampling—trampling him into hell.

Rising to his feet, Abou Koi made frantic efforts to issue an order to the slaves, but his voice broke on a horrible gurgling choke, and Hazoor hastily went to his assistance. After administering some drug, the latter once more inclined his ear to learn his master's commands; then, salaaming deeply, the councilor set an ominous metal casket on the sand close by the palanquins.

"Make now the path of sweetness, slaves!" said Hazoor to the waiting negroes. "Let it be straight and true as the sword of Abou Koi, that death may not turn aside from the white dogs."

The slaves brought long-necked jars of honey, and after smearing the heads and faces of both prisoners with the sticky fluid, they ran out two long lines of it over the sand—the two lines which led from the buried men to the metal box by the palanquin.

Then, at a sign from his master, Hazoor turned with a proud gesture to the waiting warriors.

"Abou Koi speaks thus, by the mouth of his unworthy servant. This is his hour of triumph over the proud white men—and he will savor its sweetness alone! It is not meet that the eyes of the inferior should look upon the pleasures of the great ones of this earth. Therefore withdraw to your city, O warriors of Zem-Zem! Ye shall return only at the going down of the sun. Abou Koi the Mighty hath spoken!"

Hazoor made a sweeping gesture toward the palanquin, and the leper grinned evilly at the disappointed faces around him. There was a moment's blank pause at this latest tyrannical whim of the ruler of Zem-Zem; then, as Abou Koi rose from his seat and pointed one shapeless stump toward the distant walls, the whole assembly of warriors turned their beasts toward the city, the slaves trudging doggedly in their rear.

Abou Koi resumed his seat in the palanquin, watching the two prisoners with red-rimmed, blinking eyes; while Hazoor stood straight and still, apparently only interested in the departure of the warriors and slaves.

Long minutes passed and the strange and terrible tableau remained motionless as though painted on that vast sandy canvas.

Cardell's reeling senses gradually steadied, and he opened his eyes to see Durning's head only six feet removed from him across the intervening sand. He stared at the fantastic sight, astonished, and quite forgetful for the moment that he presented the same aspect to Durning as the latter did to him.

Rage and grief filled him as he saw the agony in the eyes of his friend, and unconsciously his muscles made a spasmodic movement to go to his companion's assistance; then, as he felt the reality of the hot, suffocating prison which inclosed him, an involuntary groan escaped his lips.

Durning heard, and bit his lip fiercely in an effort to speak.

"We'll—we'll probably—lose consciousness — before — before —" His hoarse voice quavered into silence.

"Sure!" croaked Cardell.

And still the slow, awful minutes passed while the leper watched and waited, and Hazoor's keen eyes were fixed on the retreating procession.

Durning's head drooped forward, the chin resting on the hot sand, the lids closing over the heavy eyes as the sun beat fiercely down.

Cardell watched him, at first with a profound pity and then with a most consuming curiosity. Durning's head was swelling to colossal proportions and then shrinking to the size of a pea — swelling and shrinking — swelling and shrinking with a rhythmic, steady movement which lulled and fascinated Cardell.

He felt an overpowering desire to sleep and struggled against it frantically, for he was sure that if he did not keep his eyes open those black feet would come again and begin to trample —trample! He could not bear to see those feet again—he must keep awake and alert—he must not sleep on any account—he would never wake again if he slept in the snow—fatal—numb already with the cold—must get up and walk a little farther through this blizzard—there were lights ahead—lights!

VIII.

"BRIAN! Brian, old fellow! Brian!"

Painfully, reluctantly, Brian Cardell returned to the hot desert world which had faded from his consciousness.

Frantic hands were digging in the sand about him, and a silk-clad figure was babbling strange words in his ear.

"Brian—Brian!" repeated the curiously familiar voice. "Don't you know me — Montgomery — Ned Montgomery?"

Cardell let his eyelids drop wearily.

"I'm dead now, I suppose?" he murmured.

"No more dead than I am," went on the voice. "You're saved—don't you understand—saved!"

Cardell opened his eyes widely to look into the evil face of Abou Koi, and as he blinked and stared at it the gorgeously clad figure proceeded to shed its trappings on the floor of the desert, and to rub its face vigorously on a discarded length of turban.

Another moment, and Ned Montgomery stood revealed in the ruins of his disguise, his face a weird mixture of grease paint and tears, through which he grinned rapturously at Cardell and Durning.

"I knifed the old leper devil last night—had a private audience, and got him in the neck when he was examining the emerald. Hazoor stage-managed the rest of the act, bless him!"

"It is well to set free the *effendi!*" came Hazoor's calm voice, in the excellent French of the well educated Algerian Arab.

Montgomery seized a spade and set to work with feverish haste, while Hazoor methodically continued to dig Durning free of his sandy prison.

An hour later all four men had reached the narrow defile where the hidden caravan awaited them, and with thankful hearts the white men headed their camels toward the north.

Hazoor turned in his saddle as the caravan set out and looked for the last time at the grim distant outline of Zem-Zem.

"Now shall my soul obtain peace," he said, deep satisfaction in his grave voice. "For my brother, whose head the accursed one put under his feet, my brother—the mighty chief, Mahmud ibn Amanullah—is now avenged. Allah is great, and I am his servant."

THE END

BIG CITY HANDICAPS

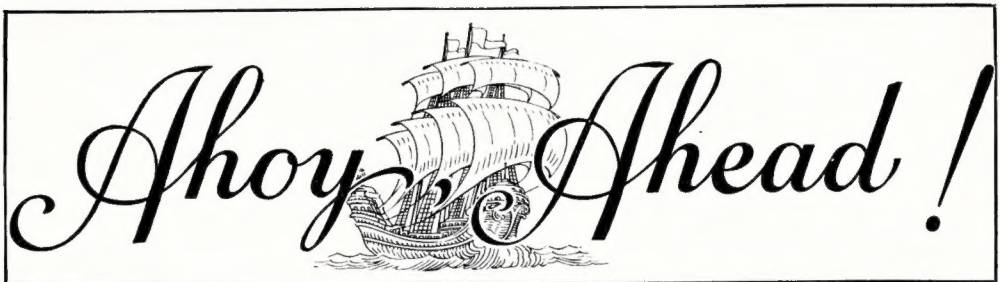
When a baby is born in a small town or city, all the people of the surrounding district know it, because their local papers tell them about the new citizen in their midst, and congratulate the home which is made happy by his arrival.

From that moment on that infant is launched as a community personality; his fellow citizens study his character as it develops; they know his good points and his weak points long before he grows up. No matter what their estimate is of him, and no matter how they may disparage or quarrel with him in his home town, when he goes out to face any other part of the wide world, they back him because he is from their town.

One notable example of the power of town spirit to raise a citizen to the pinnacles of fame—worldwide fame—occurred a few years ago when a lively city which has retained the intense local patriotism of its early small-town days, though it has grown to nearly half a million in population, raised a nice little home girl from obscurity to eminence in the musical profession in two months, and enabled her to attain a third of a million dollars in concert fees in two years.

On the same program with her at a recent operatic performance there was another young American girl singing a star's part. This second girl happened to be born in the largest city in America; she had to fight her way up to stardom from the humblest beginnings, whereas the small-city girl had simply been lifted to the top by her fellow townsmen.

The critics of the profession in which these girls scintillate say that, of the two, the big-city girl will last much longer as a singer because she had to make her way upward through sheer merit, and has grown healthily to her full artistic strength. However, meanwhile the small-city girl will be living a life of ease, entrenched behind the comfortable fortune of which the local patriotism of her fellow townsmen made her a present.



COMING FEATURES

MAY 5th ISSUE—Next Week's Number:

He looked like a motion picture cowboy, talked with an English accent, and the men called him "The Nut"; but, in a whirlwind of action, he forced them to call him

A HARD BOILED TENDERFOOT

By J. U. GIESY

This swift moving six part serial will begin next week.

A COMPLETE NOVELETTE

THE TRAIN EXPECTER

By LAURANCE M. HARE

Author of the Scrub Smith Stories

All about a station agent in the town where nobody came and the strange train of events that was started when an invalid drifted in.

Among a brilliant array of short stories will be

THE RED MAN'S WAY

By JOSEPH T. KESCEL

Yuma Tom uses his wits to work his way out of a situation that seems to have him completely hemmed in.

IN THE ISSUE FOR MAY 12:

A Long Complete Novelette

THE JOKE AT "UPSET J"

By GARRET SMITH

You will be entertained by a likable hero with a grin who unwittingly sets a whole ranch by the ears and finds himself and others in a mess the outcome of which is the biggest surprise of all.

"World's Champion Candy—HOME-MADE"

That's what folks think of Oh Henry!—absolute knock-out. 'Cause it's made the home-made way—made of the very things, the choice, quality things that come out of your own pantry. And we don't care who knows it. That's why we tell just how we make Oh Henry!

So if you are one of the millions who know how good home-made candy can be, just ask for Oh-Henry! at any candy counter.

look!

FUDGE CENTER: 1½ cups pure cane sugar; ½ teaspoon creamery butter; 1 cup rich, full cream milk; 1 cup corn syrup; white of one egg.

CARAMEL LAYER: 4 teaspoons creamery butter; 1¼ cups corn syrup; 3 cups rich, full cream milk; ¼ teaspoon salt.

PEANUT LAYER: 3 cups prime No. 1 Spanish whole nuts, roasted in oil (hulls removed).

CHOCOLATE COATING: Melt one pound pure milk chocolate.

Oh Henry!

Now in both 5¢ and 10¢ size

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